

**Joint Statement of the Helmholtz Association PostDoc Network,
Max Planck PostdocNet, and Leibniz PostDoc Network**
on the Reform of the Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act (WissZeitVG)

Berlin, 7 February 2026



Submitted to

Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space (BMFTR), and
Parliamentary Committee for Research, Technology, Space, and Technology Assessment

Preamble: Shared objectives and constructive engagement

The Helmholtz Association PostDoc Network, the Max Planck PostdocNet, and the Leibniz PostDoc Network welcome the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space (BMFTR) regarding the reform of the Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act (WissZeitVG).

We share the Federal Government's objectives of strengthening research excellence, innovation capacity, and the international competitiveness of the German research system. We further support the goal of establishing reliable, transparent, and attractive career conditions for researchers in early and mid-career phases, in line with the principles of the European Research Area (ERA) and Germany's responsibility to society to provide a sustainable, participatory, and inclusive research environment with equal opportunities, regardless of socio-economic background¹.

As organized networks representing postdoctoral researchers across major German research organizations, we aim to contribute constructively, reliably, and sustainably to this reform process. We view this exchange not as a one-off consultation but as part of a longer-term dialogue, in which we act as informed and accountable stakeholders.

This statement is informed by sustained exchange with postdoctoral initiatives, professional associations, and early-career researcher groups across universities and non-university research institutions. While formally submitted by the three networks named above, the concerns and perspectives articulated here are widely shared across disciplines, institutions, career stages, and regions within the German research system.

From our perspective, an effective reform of the WissZeitVG must focus on three core levers:

1. a functional and legally robust definition of **qualification**;
2. binding minimum standards for **contract duration and job planning certainty**; and
3. credible **career perspectives** following the postdoctoral phase.

¹ Council of the European Union (2023). *European Framework to Attract and Retain Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurial Talents (ERA)*. Brussels.
OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers: Policy Insights*. Paris.

1. Diagnosis: Persistent structural challenges and systemic impact

National reporting, administrative data, surveys conducted by postdoctoral networks, and international comparisons consistently demonstrate that central structural challenges in the German academic employment system remain unresolved². These include:

- a persistently high proportion of short-term contracts, frequently shorter than two years;
- the absence of a clear, operational definition of “**qualification**” as the legal basis for fixed-term employment;
- prolonged and unpredictable qualification phases, leading to delayed career decisions that adversely affect personal planning, family formation, and long-term life choices;
- increasing reliance on project-based third-party funding without corresponding employment security;
- interruptions in multi-year national and EU-funded research projects due to postdoctoral contract time limits, including for researchers serving as principal investigators;
- heightened vulnerability for international researchers whose residence status depends on short and unpredictable employment contracts.

These challenges undermine not only individual career development but also the effectiveness of major federal investments aimed at strengthening Germany’s research and innovation system. Without predictable and reliable postdoctoral career structures, initiatives designed to enhance international competitiveness risk losing long-term impact through talent attrition, disrupted research trajectories, and diminished system credibility³.

Moreover, employment insecurity is associated with elevated mental health risks among early-career researchers and reinforces the well-documented “**leaky pipeline**,” whereby women and researchers with caregiving responsibilities disproportionately exit academic careers during the postdoctoral phase⁴. Taken together, these structural weaknesses impede Germany’s ability to compete successfully within the European Research Area (ERA), where transparency and predictability of academic career structures are increasingly recognized as decisive competitiveness factors⁵.

² Konsortium BuWiK (Hg.) (2025). *BuWiK 2025 – Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler in einer frühen Karrierephase*.

Statistisches Bundesamt & Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (Destatis/BMBF) (2024). *Academic employment statistics in Germany: Fixed-term contracts and career stages*.

Herschberg, C., Benschop, Y., & Van den Brink, M. (2018). *Precarious postdocs*. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 34(4), 303–310.

³ Wissenschaftsrat (2025). *Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem*. Positionspapier (Drs. 2639-25).

Wissenschaftsrat (2026). *Wissenschaft in Deutschland – Perspektiven bis 2040*. Positionspapier (Drs. 4014-26).

⁴ Ysseldyk, R. et al. (2019). *A leak in the academic pipeline: Identity and health among postdoctoral women*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 129.

Sato, S. et al. (2021). *The leaky pipeline in research grant peer review and funding decisions*. *Higher Education*, 82(1), 145–162.

⁵ OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers*.

Council of the European Union (2023). *European Framework to Attract and Retain Research Talent (ERA)*.

2. Qualification: From legal ambiguity to a functional career phase

The WissZeitVG treats “**qualification**” as the central justification for fixed-term employment, yet this concept remains insufficiently defined in practice. This legal ambiguity generates uncertainty for researchers and results in inconsistent implementation across institutions, disciplines, and federal states⁶.

We propose reconceptualizing qualification as a **structured, goal-oriented, and time-limited career phase**, aligned with:

- recommendations of the Wissenschaftsrat on academic personnel structures,
- ERA career-stage definitions (R2–R3), and
- the realities of diverse academic career paths⁷.

Key elements of a functional qualification phase include:

1. **defined qualification objectives**, agreed upon at the outset of each contract and formally documented;
2. **differentiated qualification tracks**, reflecting the diversity of academic careers, such as:
 - a. research-focused careers,
 - b. research- and teaching-oriented careers, and
 - c. management-, infrastructure-, or service-oriented academic careers;
3. **explicit mutual commitments**, whereby institutions and supervisors commit to providing the necessary conditions to achieve the agreed qualification objectives.

Qualification must be understood as a **finite, time-limited phase**. Once the agreed objectives have been achieved, further fixed-term employment cannot be justified under the qualification clause. Qualification should serve as a bridge to stable career perspectives—within or beyond academia—not as an open-ended justification for serial fixed-term contracts.

⁶ Wissenschaftsrat (2025). *Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem*.
OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers*.

⁷ Council of the European Union (2023). *ERA Talent Framework (R2–R3 career stages)*.
Wissenschaftsrat (2025). *Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem*.

3. Career perspectives after the postdoctoral phase

If the reform of the WissZeitVG is to strengthen research excellence and retain international talent, evidence from Germany and abroad indicates that career perspectives beyond the postdoctoral phase must be transparent, well-defined, and realistically attainable⁸.

Key objectives should include:

- a substantial increase in permanent positions below and in parallel to the professorial level;
- transparent and merit-based pathways to permanent employment once qualification milestones are achieved;
- recognition of diverse academic contributions beyond the traditional professorial track.

To achieve these objectives, we propose:

1. **strategic rebalancing of personnel budget structures**, improving the ratio of permanent to fixed-term positions, including, where appropriate, the conversion of existing positions;
2. **competitive funding schemes** enabling institutions to apply for permanent positions aligned with institutional strategies, research priorities, and excellence criteria.

Strengthening permanent career options supports long-term workforce planning, preserves institutional expertise, and ensures that public investments in postdoctoral qualification translate into sustainable returns⁹. Current discussions on the gradual transition toward departmental structures illustrate how such models can enhance transparency, accountability, and career predictability while maintaining high standards of scientific excellence.

⁸ Boman, J., Barrioluengo, M. S., & van der Weijden, I. (2025). *Determinants of the career pathways of doctorate holders*. Higher Education.

OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers*.

⁹ Wissenschaftsrat (2025). *Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem*.

Wissenschaftsrat (2026). *Wissenschaft in Deutschland – Perspektiven bis 2040*.

4. Contract duration and employment security

International funding frameworks emphasize that effective qualification, research excellence, and responsible use of public funds require adequate planning horizons¹⁰. To ensure postdoctoral researchers have sufficient time to achieve independence and research qualification while accommodating the diversity of disciplines, research fields, and academic traditions across Germany, we propose the following binding minimum standards:

1. **minimum initial contract duration of three years** for postdoctoral researchers;
2. **minimum upper bound of six years for the qualification/postdoctoral phase**, with:
 - initial contracts of at least three years, and
 - extensions permitted only under clearly defined and justified circumstances (e.g. parental leave, illness, or documented long-term research requirements); and
3. **alignment of contract duration with project duration**, particularly for multi-year national or EU-funded research projects.

These measures strengthen research continuity, reduce administrative burden, and directly support work–life balance, all of which are explicit objectives of the WissZeitVG reform.

¹⁰ Konsortium BuWiK (Hg.) (2025). *BuWiK 2025*.

European Commission (Horizon Europe). *Model Grant Agreement and employment guidance*.

5. Third-party funding and academic independence

The acquisition of competitive third-party funding as a principal investigator is widely recognized as a key indicator of academic independence and research excellence. Current practice, however, imposes two systemic disadvantages for postdoctoral researchers:

- **employment insecurity** following the conclusion of project-based funding; and
- **exclusion from further qualification-related employment** once formal time limits under the WissZeitVG are reached.

We propose a clear differentiation between:

1. **self-managed, qualification-oriented third-party funding** (e.g., competitive fellowships or PI-led grants); and
2. **project-based funding**, in which postdoctoral researchers are employed under another principal investigator.

Periods funded through self-managed, competitive, peer-reviewed third-party grants **should not count toward WissZeitVG qualification time limits**, subject to transparent criteria and institutional certification. This approach would:

1. incentivize acquisition of competitive funding;
2. support early academic independence;
3. facilitate bridging between consecutive research projects;
4. promote access to competitive international funding schemes; and
5. strengthen Germany's position in international research funding competitions.

6. Addressing common concerns

Budgetary sustainability and cost-effectiveness

The current fiscal framework is acknowledged. Increasing the share of permanent positions should be regarded as a **structural investment with favorable medium- to long-term cost effects**. Permanent employment relationships reduce turnover and recruitment costs, preserve institutional knowledge, and support sustained research productivity¹¹. Predictable employment and remuneration structures **enable reliable workforce planning, ensure lasting returns on public investment in qualification and infrastructure, and contribute to the retention of highly qualified researchers**. This approach aligns with the Federal Government's objective of strengthening research and innovation as drivers of economic resilience and long-term growth.

Federal-state competence

Responsibility for personnel structures and employment conditions at universities and research institutions lies primarily with the federal states. The proposals presented here respect this allocation of competences. At the federal level, a constructive role includes establishing coherent legal frameworks and providing targeted incentives and funding instruments to promote stable and transparent academic career structures, while concrete implementation remains the responsibility of the states and institutions. This approach is fully compatible with the constitutional order and enables **coordinated progress** without encroaching upon **federal-state autonomy**.

Flexibility for institutions

Clearly defined career structures and transparent qualification frameworks **enhance institutional flexibility**. Predictable career pathways improve strategic workforce planning, support targeted recruitment in international competition, and enable closer alignment of personnel development with long-term research and teaching priorities¹². A stable core of permanent positions increases institutions' capacity to respond to emerging scientific opportunities while reducing reliance on short-term and ad hoc employment arrangements.

Concerns about system overload

Concerns regarding an uncontrolled expansion of permanent positions can be addressed through **phased, performance-oriented implementation**. Incremental adjustments may be integrated into existing governance, evaluation, and budgeting structures and aligned with institutional strategies and excellence criteria¹³. This approach enables targeted and sustainable strengthening of permanent staffing without introducing additional bureaucratic burdens or placing undue strain on institutional or public budgets, ensuring positions are created where strategically justified and systemically effective.

¹¹ OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers*.

Wissenschaftsrat (2025). *Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem*.

¹² OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers*.

¹³ OECD (2022). *The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers*.

Wissenschaftsrat (2025). *Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem*.

7. Conclusion: Partnership for a competitive and sustainable research system

We strongly support the Federal Government's objectives of research excellence, innovation, career transparency, and international competitiveness. Achieving these goals requires reforms that go beyond the WissZeitVG, addressing the structural foundations of academic careers and extending beyond the limitations of fixed-term contracts.

The perspectives and proposals presented here are grounded in sustained exchange with a broad range of postdoctoral and early-career researcher initiatives across the German academic system. They reflect challenges that are widely experienced across disciplines, institutions, and regions, rather than being specific to individual organizations or sectors.

Our proposals are politically feasible, economically sound, and closely aligned with current government priorities. We stand ready to contribute our expertise as active partners in shaping a sustainable, competitive, and internationally attractive research system in Germany and look forward to continued dialogue with the Federal Government and relevant stakeholders.

Signatures

Berlin, 7 February 2026

On behalf of the networks:

Helmholtz Association PostDoc Network

Dr. Georg Winkens, *Spokesperson*

Dr. Rima Siauciunaite, *Spokesperson*

Dr. Somesh Sai, *Spokesperson*

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Dr. Ana Clemente, *Spokesperson*

Dr. Miriam Kretschmer, *Deputy Spokesperson*

Leibniz PostDoc Network

Dr. Tom Dörffel, *Spokesperson*

Dr. Sherin Hassan Bran, *Spokesperson*

Supporting consultations and endorsements

This statement reflects consultations with and support from additional postdoctoral and early-career researcher initiatives across Germany, encompassing a wide variety of disciplines, career levels, institutions, and locations. Supporting networks include:

- [Supporting Network / Initiative 1]
- [Supporting Network / Initiative 2]

Annex A – Evidence Base

Boman, J., Barrioluengo, M. S., & van der Weijden, I. (2025). Determinants of the career pathways of doctorate holders: Evidence from eight European universities. *Higher Education*, 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01418-y>

Annotation: Provides empirical evidence on postdoctoral career trajectories and structural determinants within European universities. Supports analysis of qualification phases and postdoctoral career progression (Sections 2 and 3).

Council of the European Union (2023). European Framework to Attract and Retain Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurial Talents (ERA). Brussels: Council of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1640/oj>

Annotation: Defines research career stages (R1–R4) and emphasizes predictability and transparency as key factors for international competitiveness. Supports proposals for structured qualification and career pathways (Sections 2 and 3).

Herschberg, C., Benschop, Y., & Van den Brink, M. (2018). Precarious postdocs: A comparative study on recruitment and selection of early-career researchers. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 34(4), 303–310. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2018.10.001>

Annotation: Empirical analysis of precarious postdoctoral employment and systemic consequences. Informs discussion on contract duration, employment security, and project-based funding (Sections 1 and 4–5).

Heute im Bundestag (2026). hib 2026. Experten fordern Department-Strukturen an Hochschulen. Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, Parlamentsnachrichten.

<https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-1140110>

Annotation: Reports parliamentary discussions on department structures in higher education. Provides context for proposals on institutional flexibility and structural reform (Sections 3 and 6).

Konsortium BuWiK (Hg.) (2025). BuWiK 2025. Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler in einer frühen Karrierephase. Statistische Daten und Forschungsbefunde zu Promovierenden und Promovierten in Deutschland (1. Aufl.). Bielefeld: wbv Publikation.

<https://doi.org/10.3278/6004603bw>

Annotation: Comprehensive national data on contract duration, employment insecurity, and career trajectories of early-career researchers in Germany. Underpins diagnosis of structural challenges (Section 1) and proposals for contract duration and career stability (Sections 4–5).

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2022). The Future of Higher Education and Research Careers: Policy Insights. Paris: OECD Publishing.

<https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/education-policy-outlook.html>

Annotation: Provides international comparative evidence on employment stability, research productivity, and talent retention. Supports proposals for structured careers and permanent positions (Sections 2, 3, and 6).

Sato, S., Gyax, P. M., Randall, J., & Schmid Mast, M. (2021). The leaky pipeline in research grant peer review and funding decisions: Challenges and future directions. *Higher Education*, 82(1), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00626-y>

Annotation: Evidence on mental health impacts and the leaky pipeline, particularly affecting women during the postdoctoral phase. Supports gender- and diversity-sensitive recommendations in qualification and career structures (Sections 1 and 2).

Statistisches Bundesamt & Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Destatis/BMBF, 2024). Academic employment statistics in Germany: Fixed-term contracts and career stages. Wiesbaden/Berlin.

Annotation: Administrative data documenting prevalence of fixed-term contracts and their distribution

across career stages. Supports diagnosis of structural challenges and international competitiveness (Section 1).

Wissenschaftsrat (2025). Personalstrukturen im deutschen Wissenschaftssystem | Positionspapier (Drs. 2639-25). Köln, Juli 2025. <https://doi.org/10.57674/j6sf-h296>

Annotation: Authoritative policy recommendations on qualification phases, permanent staffing, and sustainable career structures. Directly informs Sections 2–4 and 6.

Wissenschaftsrat (2026). Wissenschaft in Deutschland – Perspektiven bis 2040 | Positionspapier (Drs. 4014-26). Köln, Februar 2026. <https://doi.org/10.57674/npvj-9804>

Annotation: Comprehensive assessment of projected developments in German research and higher education through 2040, including recommendations on personnel structures, career paths, and research funding. Supports proposals regarding permanent positions, postdoctoral qualification structures, and strategic workforce planning (Sections 3 and 4).

Ysseldyk, R., Greenaway, K. H., Hassinger, E., Zutrauen, S., Lintz, J., Bhatia, M. P., Frye, M., Starkenburg, E., & Tai, V. (2019). A leak in the academic pipeline: Identity and health among postdoctoral women. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 129. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01297>

Annotation: Evidence on mental health impacts and the leaky pipeline, particularly affecting women during the postdoctoral phase. Supports gender-sensitive measures and career retention strategies (Sections 1 and 2).