

“Postdocs” – Good Practice Paper of the Faculty of Human Sciences of the University of Bern

1. Preamble

According to its Strategy 2030, the University of Bern is characterized by a targeted advancement of early-career researchers, facilitating an academic career for intermediate staff and creating appropriate, internationally competitive employment conditions. In the context of changes in the higher education landscape and national and international funding conditions, the University of Bern has made improvements to the framework conditions, with the involvement of the faculties and intermediate staff. The goal is to make academic career paths more predictable and, in this way, to provide clarity on the opportunities and prospects for an academic career at an early stage. The University Ordinance was revised on February 1, 2019. At the core of this revision was the improvement of framework conditions for the advancement of early-career researchers.

The University’s concept for the advancement of early-career researchers and the measures flowing from it relate to various levels of a university career: doctorate, post-doctorate, (assistant) lectureship (TT) and assistant professorship TT. The framework conditions for the individual levels were laid down at university level. The Faculty of Human Sciences has set itself the goal of refining these requirements in the form of guidelines. For the doctorate, the Faculty of Human Sciences already has a Good Practice Paper. **The following statements refer only to the postdoctoral level.**

2. Job category: Postdoctoral researchers

When postdoctoral researchers are mentioned, here and below, this refers exclusively to the holders of the new **“postdoctoral researchers”** job category created in 2019. Hereafter, the term **postdoc** is used.

This term does not include early-career researchers who have already obtained a doctorate but do not hold a postdoc position. The WiMa IV job category (GK 20, 96 personnel points [PP]) was created for those who – in consultation with their supervisor – would like to pursue an orientation phase (a career outside or inside academia) (directly) after their doctorate or who would like to expand their doctoral project, e.g., with an additional publication. The WiMa IV position is limited to a period of two years and is not a qualification position in the narrow sense of the word (with an academic degree as the goal). For this reason, the rules listed in this Good Practice Paper do not apply to this job category (e.g., there is no binding protected research time for WiMas; the salary for this job category is also higher than for qualification positions). If a person decides to change to the postdoctoral job category after being employed as a WiMa, the time spent in that position is counted towards the postdoc phase. The framework conditions for the postdoctoral job category introduced in 2019 are described in the Postdoc Regulations and can be downloaded here:

https://www.unibe.ch/unibe/portal/content/e152701/e322683/e325053/e916384/ul_rgl_postdoc_en_ger.pdf

3. Phases and goal of the post-doctorate

The post-doctorate is divided into two phases: Early and Advanced Postdoc. The main purpose of the Early Postdoc phase is to work on a project, to find and conceptually develop one's own research program, research mobility and, if necessary, to acquire personal funding. A basic decision should be made as soon as possible – ideally at the beginning of the Early Postdoc – as to whether an academic career (with the goal of a professorship or possibly a lectureship) is to be pursued or whether the focus should rather be on research-related work, inside or outside the university sector. The aim of the Advanced Postdoc is to consolidate one's position as a researcher, with a view to qualifying for a professorship (so-called "list eligibility").

https://intern.unibe.ch/dienstleistungen/forschung/konzept_der_nachwuchsfoerderung/ueberblick/index_ger.html

4. Postdoc Agreement and mentorship

The Postdoc Agreement represents a central advancement tool for the postdoc phase. In the Postdoc Agreement, the goals aimed for at each qualification phase are specified in writing. On the one hand, the goal setting serves to ensure transparency; on the other, it represents a catalog of criteria for interim evaluations on the way to list eligibility. For the transition from Early to Advanced Postdoc (see below), it provides a catalog of criteria that the postdocs themselves, their superiors and the habilitation committee can use to assess individual scientific development. Ideally, the Postdoc Agreement should be completed and signed approx. 6 months after the start of employment. If more time is required for the selection of the supervisor or for establishing the catalog of goals, a maximum period of one year is possible in individual cases. A template for the Postdoc Agreement can be found at the link above.

Postdocs are encouraged by the Faculty of Human Sciences to find a mentor who will actively supervise their postdoc career. Mentors should be involved in the drafting of the Postdoc Agreement. A mentor can be any habilitated person; however, it would be advantageous for them to be a member of the Faculty or the University of Bern with whom the postdoc has or can establish a relationship of trust. Regular meetings are recommended, as well as additional meetings as required. The mentor is not involved, however, in the decision whether and when the promotion from Early to Advanced Postdoc takes place (see section 7).

5. Protected research time and teaching activities

An important prerequisite for both stages of the post-doctorate is to have sufficient time for one's own scientific qualification ("protected research time" [PRT], a minimum of 50%). PRT includes all activities that directly support the postdoc's research in the chosen research program. The goal of PRT is to enable postdocs to develop their profile through publications, their own research program, and the establishment and independent leadership of a research group. If a person temporarily reduces their employment to 50% of a full-time position due to care duties, they do *not* take on any further teaching or service tasks during this time. Often, we are dealing with an 80% position (although 100% would actually be ideal). With an 80% position, 50% would still be PRT and only the remaining 30% can be taken up with teaching and other institutional duties.

In general, postdocs are free to organize their PRT as they wish. PRT includes, for example:

- preparation of a project proposal for which the postdoc is either the applicant or which will bring in funding for the postdoc;
- any research activity narrowly defined, such as data collection, data processing and evaluation, literature research, and ultimately, publishing, which contributes to the postdoc's own qualification;
- research administration in the projects that serve the postdoc's own further scientific qualification;
- supervision of MSc and BSc theses, insofar as these directly contribute to the postdoc's research interests (e.g., towards a review, a meta-analysis or a pilot study that assist in the writing of a project proposal or support a sub-study of the research program), as well as the (co-)supervision of those doctoral students who are working in the postdoc's research area (i.e., working directly with them and thus providing a benefit, e.g., through a joint publication).

Outside the PRT, postdocs have teaching and academic administration duties in their respective division. At an employment level of 100%, a teaching load of 2 to a maximum of 4 semester week hours (SWH) is recommended. Ideally, it would be a minimum of 2 SWH with additional tasks in the supervision of theses outside their own research program, in academic administration or in other services (e.g., taking over individual lectures in basic courses, co-organizing a colloquium). The idea of advancement stands in the forefront of these considerations, where varied teaching experience, and participation in services and academic administration are considered to be just as important and beneficial for the later career as research activities. In consultation with the respective head of division, teaching duties can be organized in a variable and flexible way (also, e.g., teaching in tandem). With regard to teaching experience, there should be a difference in teaching load between Early and Advanced Postdocs (i.e., a slightly smaller volume of teaching for Early Postdocs than for Advanced Postdocs).

6. International experience

It is desirable for postdocs to gain experience abroad. If this takes place during the lecture-free period, it should be quite feasible in view of their obligations outside the PRT. If the stay lasts a semester or longer, the postdocs will be unavailable for teaching and service duties for a longer period of time. In such a case, the head of division should make it possible for postdocs to go abroad without compensating for teaching. Nevertheless, responsibilities (e.g., for theses) should continue and be organized in consultation or take place remotely. (If the stay abroad is in the form of a “secondment” [i.e., paid by the division], the teaching and administrative tasks must be compensated by the department. If postdocs go abroad with their own funding, this frees up PP that can be used as compensation.)

7. Change from Early to Advanced Postdoc

The regulations provide for a change from Early to Advanced Postdoc after four years at the latest. Nevertheless, it is considered good practice to allow postdocs – provided they have received a positive evaluation – to change from Early to Advanced Postdoc after three years at the latest and preferably even after two years. While Early Postdocs are calculated at 84 PP for a 100% position, Advanced Postdoc positions are valued at 96 PP, which has a corresponding effect on the salary of postdocs in the individual phases. The Faculty’s Doctoral Regulations also stipulate that Advanced Postdocs may independently supervise and assess doctoral theses within their research program. With this in mind, the change can be seen as an important career milestone.

All supervisors named in the Postdoc Agreement are involved in the evaluation of postdocs.

In relation to the change, the Faculty considers it good practice for candidates to submit a short exposé to the dean and the habilitation committee. This 5- to 10-page exposé should document research activities (outline of the research program, acquisition of external funding, projects, publications) as well as teaching activities (courses, supervision of Bachelor’s and Master’s theses) in relation to the Postdoc Agreement. This exposé should also contain a critical self-evaluation, together with a projection of planned research and teaching activities as an Advanced Postdoc.

This exposé is submitted to the Dean’s Office together with a (possibly very brief) statement from the candidate’s superior and is discussed by the Habilitation Committee. It primarily serves the purpose of transparency; the final decision on a change should continue to remain with their superior.

8. Scientific independence

Together with the aim of attaining so-called “list eligibility”, the Faculty of Human Sciences should also take the aspect of scientific independence into account. Early-career researchers are therefore encouraged to collaborate with other researchers (also outside their own division, outside their own institute, and beyond the boundaries of faculty and university) both nationally and internationally. Projects and publications without the involvement of superiors are also encouraged and should be supported. Co-authorship with their superior

(because they provide the personnel resources and possibly the infrastructure) is not a necessity. Collaborations, projects and publications without the superior represent a tool for advancement of early-career researchers that should not be underestimated.

9. Bridging option after the Advanced Postdoc Phase

If the postdoc phase ends successfully with list eligibility, the Faculty of Human Sciences considers it to be good practice for the advancement of early-career researchers that, after the maximum period of 6 years as a postdoc, an opportunity be created to offer its early-career researchers a bridging period (max. 2 years) until they take up a new position. The university regulations do not yet provide for such a possibility. The Faculty of Human Sciences will advocate for the creation of the basic framework for such a job category at university level.