

# The Norwegian Association of Researchers' policy on postdoctoral research fellows

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**Postdoctoral research fellowships are a recruitment position in the Norwegian educational system whose main objective is to qualify candidates to take up leading academic posts.**

The number of postdoctoral research fellows has risen significantly since 1998, when the institutions were allowed to establish their own postdoctoral posts. According to the Database for Statistics on Higher Education, in 2016 there were more than 1,400 full-time equivalents in such posts, an increase of almost 40 per cent since 2010 alone. The main aim of postdoctoral research fellowships is to qualify candidates to take up leading posts (professorships), and they are cultivated as such. Nonetheless, the increase in the number of permanent leading posts does not even begin to match the number of new recruitment posts. A survey from 2015 revealed that only 14 per cent of postdoctoral fellows had gained a professorship within eight years of completing their postdoctoral studies, and as many as 40 per cent had left the educational and research institutions (NIFU Working Paper 2015:15).

The Norwegian Association of Researchers is striving to establish better academic career paths with more secure and more predictable frameworks. Postdoctoral research fellowships are temporary fixed-term posts. Consequently, it is important to ensure that these are not misused, and that the regulations define the required arrangements as clearly as possible. The institutions that appoint postdoctoral research fellows are responsible for following up career development and qualification.

The Norwegian Association of Researchers will in particular monitor use of postdoctoral research fellowships to ensure that they are used in accordance with intentions and regulations. This is why we are committed to safeguarding pay and working conditions for postdoctoral posts.

## 1. Genuine recruitment position

**Postdoctoral research fellowships must be genuine recruitment positions intended to qualify candidates for professorships.**

The employment relationship for research fellows is regulated in the *Regulations concerning terms and conditions of employment for the posts of postdoktor (postdoctoral research fellow), stipendiat (PhD candidate), vitenskapelig assistent (research assistant) and spesialistkandidat (resident)* and founded on the *Norwegian Act relating to universities and university colleges*. Section 1-2 no. 2 of the regulation stipulates that postdoctoral research fellowships may only be used by universities and university colleges that can issue postgraduate qualifications. The purpose of this is to ensure that postdoctoral research fellows are well integrated into a strong professional environment that can offer both follow-up/advice and effective further qualification for postdoctoral research fellows. In practice the post is also used outside the HE sector, with varying terms and agreements. The Norwegian Association of Researchers believes that the regulation should also apply outside the area covered by the Act relating to universities and university colleges, so that all postdoctoral research fellows are offered the same terms and conditions regardless of where they work. Terms of employment for postdoctoral research fellows should therefore be established in the Norwegian Working Environment Act or an associated regulation.

The regulation establishes that postdoctoral fellowships must be genuine recruitment positions intended to qualify candidates for leading academic posts. Postdoctoral research fellows must perform independent research work that provides a basis for further qualification during their training period. The framework for further qualification must be embedded in a dedicated project plan and associated progress plan. Postdoctoral research fellows must not be temporary project researchers or teachers/supervisors.

Postdoctoral research fellowships are a fixed-term post, and thus an exception to the principal rule of permanent appointments. The main challenge relating to the post is that the regulation does not clearly define the specific assignments and activities covered by the post. The extended use of temporary appointments, together with growing and non-binding use of postdoctoral research fellowships, is tending to undermine standard academic career paths. The establishment of a postdoctoral research fellowship should be a statement of intent that clearly signals that the institution regards the research area concerned as a focus area with genuine recruitment requirements.

Postdoctoral research fellowships were introduced to enable the best candidates to qualify for leading academic posts by performing original, independent research work. This is often not the case today. Many postdoctoral research fellows are appointed as temporary project researchers, or obliged to perform so much general work that the post effectively corresponds to a standard combined academic post. Furthermore, in many cases the term of the postdoctoral research fellowship equates to the regulation's minimum of two years, which makes qualification for leading academic posts unrealistic. Three years of pure research time should be a minimum requirement.

It is unfortunate that various institutions are now able to establish postdoctoral posts involving multiple fixed-term appointments. This makes it possible to establish more temporary posts, tends to make the position of postdoctoral research fellow less binding for the institutions, and increases the competence requirement for permanent employment.

**Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:**

- Postdoctoral research fellows are only employed at institutions that are authorised to award postgraduate qualifications (see Section 1.2.2 of the regulation). Other institutions must apply to the Ministry and comply with the applicable legislation and collective agreements for postdoctoral research fellows.
- All postdoctoral research fellows are guaranteed equal rights regardless of where they are appointed.
- The regulation's requirements governing the content of the post are clarified, in particular with regard to qualification during the postdoctoral research period, in order to safeguard the breadth and independence required to qualify for leading posts.
- The appointment term as postdoctoral research fellow comprises at least three years of pure research.
- On application for a postdoctoral fellowship, project proposals are presented that secure the required breadth and independence to qualify for a leading post. The proposals contain a progress plan.
- Postdoctoral fellowships contain no more than one fixed-term appointment.

## **2. Competitive pay**

**The terms and conditions of pay must be sufficient to allow the institutions to attract research talents.**

To be able to compete for, attract and retain qualified and motivated graduates, universities and university colleges must be perceived as competitive workplaces that offer good career prospects and competitive pay and working conditions.

Postdoctoral research fellows are currently guaranteed the same minimum pay as other posts with associate professor competence, under pay scale 24. It is an important principle for the Norwegian Association of Researchers that postdoctoral research fellowships do not offer lower minimum pay rates than other associate professorships. However, postdoctoral research fellowships are often advertised with pay towards the bottom of this scale. (The average pay for the Norwegian Association of Researchers' postdoctoral research fellows in the state sector equates to pay scale 60.) Consequently, to attract the most sought-after research talents, posts advertised must be more representative of the entire pay-scale range. Individuals with competence and experience exceeding a minimum level should start on higher pay.

**Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:**

- Posts are announced across the entire pay spectrum and employers implement a pay policy that ensures that postdoctoral research fellows' pay reflects their competence, attractiveness and experience.
- Starting pay is raised, and postdoctoral research fellows compete for the available funds on the same footing as other members in local pay negotiations.
- All research fellows working outside the public sector are afforded at least the same pay conditions as those contained in the Collective Wage Agreement for government employees
- All postdoctoral research fellows are offered an annual pay review.
- Individuals who arrive from a higher-paid post in the enterprise can retain corresponding pay as postdoctoral research fellows.
- Postdoctoral research fellowships are fully funded to enable the institutions to offer favourable framework conditions, including operating resources and modern academic equipment.

## **3. Implementation and follow-up**

**Working conditions must be facilitated to allow postdoctoral research fellows to achieve the objectives of their qualification work during their appointment term.**

As highlighted in the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions' report on career policy for the HE sector (2015), postdoctoral research fellows suffer from poor follow-up and often unpredictable working conditions, and lack of an institutionalised career policy.

In accordance with the regulation, a project implementation plan must be prepared and used as a basis for appointments to postdoctoral research fellowships. This plan must be incorporated into the employment contract and must include a project description and progress plan and the scope of any mandatory work. The plan must state who is responsible for providing postdoctoral research fellows with professional advice and implementing

measures if postdoctoral research fellows have problems achieving the objectives of their qualification work.

Effective from 2017, the Research Council of Norway has required a development plan to be prepared for postdoctoral research fellows who are funded through the Council's programmes. The development plan must contain target achievements for the postdoctoral research fellowship period, including qualification measures for all main areas that will be assessed on appointment to associate professorships, and an internationalisation plan. Development plans of this type should also be used when postdoctoral research fellows are funded through sources other than the Research Council of Norway.

Postdoctoral research fellows are regarded as recognised researchers (under the EU's classification framework) and thus are not assigned a supervisor in the same way as postgraduates. However, in reality many postdoctoral research fellows will need, and wish to have, a mentor scheme. A mentor can function as a sounding board for applications, project development, teaching, qualification and careers, and is also particularly important for the high proportion of foreign postdoctoral research fellows in Norway (40 per cent in 2009 according to NIFU Working Paper 2015:15). A mentor can contribute advice and guidance about the Norwegian employment market and application processes in Norway, and thus prevent sought-after resources disappearing abroad. Institutions that employ postdoctoral research fellows should therefore establish mentor schemes.

Previous surveys of Norwegian Association of Researchers members ([Publication Series no. 6/2007](#)) have shown that most postdoctoral research fellows believed they had sound conditions for performing qualifying work. Nonetheless, two out of three experienced occasional problems with other assignments taking up too much time and attention. The employer has a particular responsibility for ensuring that work assignments and the volume of work are consistent with the employment contract, and the progress and development plans.

In accordance with the regulation, absence must currently comprise at least two consecutive weeks to trigger the right to prolong the appointment term. Even if valid absence comprises in total several weeks or even months, there is no right to prolongation. This is unreasonable and makes it more difficult for postdoctoral research fellows who have legitimate needs for multiple short-term absences to complete their qualification work. The regulations are also inconsistent with the Letter of Intent on inclusive workplaces, and primarily affect the chronically ill and individuals with specific responsibility for children and immediate family. Similarly, some postdoctoral research fellows have their pay and/or operating resources reduced in the event of long-term absence.

**Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:**

- The institutions implement effective procedures governing how new postdoctoral research fellows are received and integrated professionally and socially. Postdoctoral research fellows' employment contracts include implementation plans and state who is responsible for professional follow-up.
- Postdoctoral research fellows are offered performance appraisals in line with other employees.
- The institutions offer mentor schemes.
- Arriving postdoctoral research fellows receive help and guidance in connection with relocation.

- Multiple short-term absences based on legislation or collective agreements, where total absence corresponds to two or more weeks, are treated in the same way as continuous absence of the same length and trigger a corresponding prolongation of the appointment term. The following addenda are included in the regulation: “Documented short-term absence can on application to the institution provide a basis for prolongation if total absence corresponds to at least two consecutive weeks”.
- No one has their pay or operating resources reduced as a result of sickness absence or parental leave.
- The Vancouver rules (or corresponding research-ethical rules for academic publication) are followed.
- All postdoctoral research fellows are guaranteed academic freedom and intellectual property rights in line with other academic employees.

#### **4. Internationalisation and quality**

**Arrangements must be made to ensure that qualifying work is of a high, international standard and that all postdoctoral research fellows have the opportunity to take longer secondments abroad during the period.**

Appointment to a post whose main objective is to qualify candidates for leading academic posts should offer opportunities for researcher mobility and international collaboration. This can only be achieved through adequate funding and facilitation from the Norwegian authorities, and by Norwegian institutions entering into active researcher-exchange partnerships with reputable institutions abroad. DBH's statistics reveal that 30 per cent of postdoctoral research fellows employed at Norwegian institutions in 2011 were seconded abroad for four or more weeks. [DBH's statistics](#) also demonstrate that international researcher mobility (including postdoctoral research fellows) in Norwegian universities has been declining since 2006. This signals that the conditions for researcher mobility are not sufficiently robust.

Since 2017, the Research Council of Norway has required postdoctoral research fellows that are funded by the Council to be offered overseas fellowships plus 3–12 months' prolongation of the research fellowship period where research is performed abroad. The Norwegian Association of Researchers believes that such schemes should be applicable to all postdoctoral research fellows, including the around 50 per cent of this group who are not funded by the Research Council of Norway. The rules for continuation of social benefits during secondments abroad, for example child benefits, are complex and often appear somewhat cumbersome. Today many of the benefits are stopped after a few months, depending on the country researchers are resident in, the status of membership of the social security scheme and the total length of the residence.

Arrangements must be made to encourage candidates to take up secondments abroad away from their home institution. However, such arrangements must not be obligatory, since this could be excluded on family- or health-related or other grounds. In general, it appears important that suitable arrangements are made for dual-career families in Norway if expectations and requirements for international mobility are to be realised.

**Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:**

- All postdoctoral research fellows, regardless of their source of funding, are given sufficient resources to perform research abroad and financial terms that allow their families and children to join them.
- Postdoctoral research fellows who are required to make longer stays abroad retain their social benefits during their entire residence abroad.
- A national NAV office is established for researcher mobility with expertise in arranging secondments abroad.

## **5. Career follow-up and recruitment plans**

**Clearer career paths and more permanent associate professorships must be established in order to secure recruitment for research. Institutions that employ postdoctoral research fellows must be able to offer career guidance for this group.**

Most postdoctoral research fellows are not covered by recruitment plans at their own institution, and many candidates face a great deal of unpredictability and uncertainty. This makes it necessary to develop clear career plans for postdoctoral research fellows at all institutions that employ candidates in this post. Career opportunities in postdoctoral research fellowships must be viewed in the context of the PhD candidate position, changes in the number of permanent academic posts and the pilot scheme for employment on tenure tracks. The tenure track must be a replacement for non-binding postdoctoral research fellowships and not for permanent posts.

The institution should be responsible for offering advice and guidance on careers, whether in the HE sector, the institutional sector or in other areas of the employment market. Career centres with competence in postgraduate guidance could be one viable way to provide guidance for postdoctoral research fellows. Mentor schemes (see item 3) represent a further solution that could provide a better overview of potential career paths.

**Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:**

- More permanent academic posts are established.
- All externally financed research posts are fully funded, in order to preserve the institutions' basic allocation and opportunities to establish new permanent posts.
- The institutions establish systems for career planning for the recruitment posts and employ clear, uniform and predictable recruitment and staffing plans.
- An evaluation is made of whether the pilot scheme involving tenure tracks helps to establish a realistic qualification path until such time as candidates secure a leading academic post.



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