

How should the Norwegian postdoctoral position of the future be designed?

March 11, 2021

Challenges with today's postdoctoral position

- **The qualification requirements are unclear.** It is not clear in the regulations what kind of qualification is in question and there are no binding provisions on the further follow-up.
- **The postdocs are used as project labour.** Many enterprises employ postdocs in pre-defined research projects, with little thought for further qualification or based on a lasting need to develop this specific research competence.
- **The postdocs' competence is not in demand outside the research sector.** Many therefore experience lacking certain qualifications or being overqualified for another labour market and hence maladaptation to the general labour market.
- **The qualification requirements for a permanent academic position are increasing.** As the number of postdocs and highly qualified foreign researchers increases, so does the level of entry and competence requirements for scientific positions.
- **Norwegians and women apply for postdoctoral positions to a lesser extent.** The proportion of non-Norwegian postdocs is increasing and only every third applicant is a woman (NIFU).

Proposal for a new postdoctoral scheme

The postdoctoral position – as a fixed-term recruitment position with a special purpose to further develop talented doctors into independent researchers – must be designed so that the institutions' responsibility for assessing the need for competence is laid down and the qualification element becomes clear, binding and real. We propose that the following elements be clarified in national regulations, to be applied regardless of the source of funding:

- **Further qualification for higher level position.** A challenge within the current situation is that the purpose of the post doc fellowship is to qualify for a top academic position (i.e. professor). Furthermore, the minimum competence requirement for the positions associate professor / senior lecturer is a doctoral degree, something the postdoctoral fellows have, while at the same time no one will actually qualify as a professor during a postdoctoral period. The postdoctoral position should therefore be specified as a further qualification of researchers at the associate professor level, with the aim of achieving recognized requirements for independence in research and education.

- **Qualification period of 4 years.** To achieve the goal, the qualification period must be set at four years, of which three years are set aside for research work. The current provisions on extension must be continued and clarified.
- **Requirement for a plan for the qualifying elements.** The current requirements for a plan for the qualification work should be further developed and the following elements should be included:
 - **3 years for Research & Development (R&D).** Three years of the postdoctoral period are earmarked for R&D activities, with the main emphasis on independent research. The R&D component shall also include the development of skills in project management and research administration.
 - **1 year for teaching competence (or equivalent).** One year of the period is set aside for the development of teaching and supervision competence. This includes courses / programs (minimum 200 hours) that ensure basic skills in planning, implementation, evaluation and development of teaching and supervision, corresponding to the requirements for an associate professor position. For postdocs in specific subject areas or sectors outside universities and university colleges, where it is not relevant or practically possible to build teaching competence, one year shall be set aside to develop competence in one or more relevant areas such as dissemination, innovation, business cooperation, acquisition, curation, clinical activities etc.
 - **External activities / Mobility.** The position should also include an element that requires collaboration with stake holders outside the sector or a stay at other research institutions, preferably internationally. For incoming postdocs, it will be natural to have a separate integration program, while for postdocs with a background from Norwegian institutions, it will be more relevant to stay at an institution abroad. The element can be linked to both R&D and teaching.
- **Needs assessment and career guidance.** When using the postdoctoral position, the institutions must also provide a written assessment of the need for competence in the academic environment both at their own institution and beyond. The assessment shall be included in the strategic planning at the institution and as part of the individual follow-up of the postdoctoral fellow. The postdoctoral fellow must have a professional mentor, as the regulations also describe today, but a somewhat stronger requirement to conduct and follow up career development conversations must also be included.

If the postdoctoral position is arranged in this way, we believe it commits the employer to such an extent and has such a clear individual development element, that the position will only be used when there is a mutual desire to qualify the postdoctoral fellow for a permanent position, and only be relevant for one employment period.