

Framework conditions of the University of Oldenburg for early-career researchers

The University of Oldenburg is first and foremost committed to attracting top research and teaching talent, to promoting a wide range of career paths, and to helping early-career researchers plan their careers. This involves offering them the best possible conditions at all career levels. These conditions will vary according to the level that the researchers find themselves at and between disciplines and faculties, but all career levels should be subject to standards that shape framework conditions to establish comparable, quality-assured measures to promote early-career researchers in line with the University's commitments.

By early-career researchers, the university refers to doctoral candidates and postdocs who qualify or continue to qualify academically within the scope of various formal structures such as grants, third-party funds, budgets or with external funding. Early-career researchers are subject to consecutive qualification stages based on their degree of academic independence and research performance. In describing these stages, the University is guided by the EU model prescribing the following career levels¹:

R1 First Stage Researcher: up to the point of PhD

R2 Recognised Researcher: PhD holders or equivalent who are not yet fully independent

R3 Established Researcher: researchers who have developed a level of independence

R4 Leading Researcher: researchers leading their research area or field

It is important to note that these stages do not have to correspond one-to-one with individual career paths and furthermore, this will often not be the case in the German system, with its different types of positions (for example, for the "habilitation" postdoctoral lecturing qualification). In addition, although the stages build on each other in the sense of academic career progression, they need not, and indeed are by no means always followed strictly in the order R1 to R4. Nevertheless, the EU stage model is also a useful tool in the German situation for making the careers of early-career researchers representable and comparable across national borders.

On this basis, the stages of R1-R3 that are applicable to early-career researchers and the standards and quality assurance measures envisaged for the University of Oldenburg are described below. The duration indicated for the separate stages is intended to serve as a guide in relation to the various steps in the career of a junior researcher.

R1: up to point of PhD (about 3-4 years)

During this stage, students who have shown outstanding academic achievement work on their doctorate as doctoral candidates. As a rule, the doctorate is started after the student has graduated from their Master's degree programme. In exceptional cases, however, students may fast-track to the University's doctoral programme. The doctorate is completed either individually or as part of a structured programme and represents an independent research achievement.

Ideally, the scope of FTEs regarding third-party funds and budget items should be guided by the corresponding DFG (German Research Foundation) subject classification system. The duration of the contract for the doctoral phase is based on the provisions of the Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz (WissZeitVG, German Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act)

¹ See "Towards a European Framework for Researcher Careers", European Commission (2011).

and should be at least three years for the initial contract. The total duration of the doctorate should take into account the usual circumstances for the field in question, but, as a rule, should not exceed 4 years.

Within the framework of the doctorate, all doctoral students should have the opportunity, if desired, to gain initial experience in academic teaching and committee work, irrespective of the underlying formal funding structure of their doctorate. However, it is important that such activities remain manageable for the student regarding scope and thematic focus. The same applies to any further duties undertaken in relation to the activities.

The University of Oldenburg ensures optimal conditions for doctoral research through binding supervision agreements for doctoral candidates across all faculties and for all types of doctorates. These agreements safeguard the rights and obligations both of doctoral candidates and of the supervising professors, and should be drawn up as soon as a doctoral candidate is accepted. All doctoral candidates should have basic access to the infrastructure of their institute/faculties. This refers in particular to access to rooms and a workstation, as well as to resources for mobility and training, for instance. Doctoral candidates should receive regular feedback from their supervisor on their academic performance, also in comparison to their peers, and be encouraged to participate in activities such as conferences, workshops, etc. with a view to further academic qualification.

To further assure the quality of the doctoral phase, the University facilitates early enrolment for all doctoral candidates. The University also ensures access to support programmes that qualify students for different career goals (e.g. in the Graduate Schools, the Graduate Academy, Didactics in Higher Education, Personnel and Organisational Development and the Career Service). The PhD representation committee acts as a support body for all matters concerning doctoral candidates.

R2: Early postdoc stage (about 2 years)

Early-career researchers who have completed their doctorate with outstanding results and who wish to gain further academic qualifications can use this phase to enhance their academic research and teaching profiles. To this end, they need space for their own research, e.g. for support in obtaining third-party funding, for starting a postdoctoral lecturing project (“habilitation”), and regarding opportunities for national and international profiling.

During this stage, supervisors may also act as mentors who guide and support early-career researchers. Regular feedback on research and teaching performance from the professors responsible (based on teaching evaluation results), also in comparison with peers or measured against the standards of the respective subject community, enables early-career researchers to realistically assess their chances of remaining in the academic system permanently at an early stage, and to further develop their competences in various directions. In this context, regular, systematic feedback interviews between supervisors and early-career researchers should be developed as an important management tool. Apart from academic supervision, early-career researchers should receive support and counselling services from a central point with a view to strengthening their awareness and acquisition of interdisciplinary skills.

As networking and presentation is an important element of career planning for early-career researchers both within and outside their own specialist community, the University also promotes mobility during this stage. Since the R2 stage tends to be decisive for female

academics in particular regarding their further career and life planning, whether inside or outside academia, the University offers specific provisions for this group to counteract the “leaky pipeline”.

The R2 stage is either immediately followed by the R3 stage or the transition to a permanent position in research and teaching (as WM (research assistants) or LfbA (teaching staff for special tasks)), or the transition to a non-university career.

R3: Advanced postdocs as well as junior and tenure-track professorships (about 4-6 years)

At this stage, academic staff, among others, are in qualification positions (e.g. with the aim of a “habilitation”) or a third-party funded postdoctoral position, assistant professorships, heads of junior research groups within the meaning of the Lower Saxony Higher Education Act, or junior and tenure-track professorships. This is therefore a highly heterogeneous group of individuals in terms of formal status.

What they do have in common, however, is that they have generally opted for an academic career and have achieved a certain degree of academic independence. At this stage, job category and contract duration should be in line with the qualification objectives.

At the R3 stage, these advanced early-career researchers face a range of challenges. While on the one hand needing to advance their own academic work and progress towards academic independence, they are also confronted with more extensive teaching tasks and, in the case of appointed professors, additional self-administration tasks.

The institutes and faculties should support early-career researchers with regard to their concomitant organisational work. When assigning tasks to these individuals, they should make sure that they continue to have sufficient space for intensive independent research activities and their further establishment in the academic community. Early-career researchers should have the opportunity to contribute towards teaching their own profile topics, and not be overburdened with responsibilities for basic courses or major events. Suitable persons should be appointed in the institutes and faculties to mentor early-career researchers. In this capacity, they should provide these researchers with regular feedback on the status of their academic profile and, if necessary, support them in accomplishing their tasks. In addition, the standard interim evaluation provides orienting feedback for junior and tenure-track professorships, including a status discussion with the responsible member of the presidential chair or the Dean.

Institutes and faculties should ensure that adequate resources are made available to early-career researchers. Early-career researchers should have access to the research infrastructure they need – laboratory facilities, large-scale equipment, etc. As standard, junior and tenure-track professorships should include a doctoral student position and independently available resources.

At stage R3, early-career researchers often take on management responsibility for student assistants, doctoral candidates or postdocs under their supervision for the first time. There are central programmes available to support them regarding their specific needs. This also applies to work-life balance issues, which can lead to heavy burdens and possibly also restrictions (e.g. with regard to mobility regarding stays abroad for further profile enhancement and networking) due to the fact that many will be building both a family and a career at this stage.

At this stage, postdocs with research experience can qualify as university lecturers. Successful completion of this stage usually leads to the R4 stage, in which postdocs are promoted to active professors with a permanent position.