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MDC POSTDOC GUIDELINES

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PREAMBLE

Through their research, postdocs at the MDC make significant contributions to solving the grand challenges facing science, society, and the industry. Their achievements are central to the scientific success of the MDC.

The present guidelines are based on the guidelines of the Helmholtz Association¹. The MDC shares the understanding with other Helmholtz centers that the period after receiving a doctoral degree is key to a researcher's career development. The centers aim to offer postdoctoral scientists an outstanding scientific environment to carry out their research and to further develop their scientific profile and professional competences, as well as supporting them in making decisions about their future careers.

The postdoc phase is limited in time and within the rules of the German law (Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz, WissZVG). The time permitted on temporary research contracts should not exceed 12 years, inclusive time spent on PhD research but excluding any parental leave and time spent on a fellowship. Furthermore, permanent positions for postdocs are limited at the MDC. Thus MDC gives particular emphasis to postdoctoral researchers support from principal investigators and infrastructures such as the Postdoc Office. It is important during this career stage to clearly communicate expectations regarding research performance, to support the postdocs in reaching their personal goals for further qualification, and to provide regular career advice. Such advice should also include counseling on the diverse spectrum of job opportunities outside the realm of academic research.

The MDC welcomes individual, social and cultural diversity and is aware of the challenges faced by postdoctoral researchers who change institutions upon completion of their doctorate. The MDC research culture commits to helping these postdocs expand their research profile, broaden their scientific network, and gain experience with different methods.

The guidelines presented here, provide a foundation for greater transparency and reliability during the postdoctoral stage.

DEFINITION OF THE POSTDOC PHASE

The postdoc phase is the stage of a researcher's career that follows their doctoral degree studies. During this time, postdoctoral researchers are expected to demonstrate the ability to make important contributions to science, publish their work, expand their professional networks, including scientific cooperations and gain clarity as to what professional objectives they consider desirable and achievable. In the course of this development, postdoctoral researchers, in addition, acquire interdisciplinary competences, such as leadership, supervision, project management experience, and communication skills that are crucial for

¹[Helmholtz Postdoc Guidelines](#)

every career². Principal investigators as well as the MDC are also very important in the success of the postdoc phase. The responsibilities outlined below will help to ensure a successful postdoc phase.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Together with the MDC, which creates optimal framework conditions for the postdoc phase, both the postdoctoral researchers themselves and their principal investigators take responsibility for the successful outcome of the postdoc phase.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHERS INCLUDE:

- § choose and develop a research topic in agreement with their principal investigator.
- § perform research to high standard, assuming ethical responsibility and following the principles of good scientific practice.
- § work in a collegial and cooperative manner.
- § strengthen their scientific profile, for example through publications, conference contributions and networking at the MDC and within the international scientific community.
- § actively seek to acquire third party funding and awards.
- § prepare for an initial status meeting with the principal investigator(s) within six months of starting period to clarify the important components of the postdoctoral period, i.e. duration, research topic and surrounding topics (particularly authorship and scientific profile).
- § participate in annual status reviews with the principal investigator(s).
- § actively seek feedback from the principal investigator and mentors within and outside academia.
- § plan their career, reflect on motivation, professional goals and the requisite qualifications
- § make use of training and counseling services offered at MDC.

² [The National Postdoc Association defines six core competencies of postdocs that can serve as a basis for determining qualification goals.](#)

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS³ INCLUDE:

- § allow the postdoc a high level of responsibility and scientific freedom and ensures that expectations are mutually understood.
- § assume ethical responsibility and follows and conveys the principles of good scientific practice.
- § holds an initial status meeting with the postdoctoral researcher within six months of starting period to clarify the important components of the postdoctoral period, i.e. duration, research topic and surrounding topics (particularly authorship and scientific profile).
- § hold at least one dedicated annual status review per year with each postdoc, discussing career perspectives, external mentors and training needs, which is recorded in minutes and accessible to the postdocs and principal investigators.
- § meet regularly and respond quickly to requests for feedback and gives regular feedback on the research project (approximately every two months).
- § support the postdoc in shaping an independent scientific profile and, in particular, encourages and financially supports active participation in conferences and production of scientific publications, which help to raise the postdoc's visibility. The principal investigator also aids the postdoc in identifying applicable fellowships or grants and supports the postdoc in the submission of grant applications.
- § enable the postdoc to acquire competencies beyond their research, for example, to communicate their scientific results to a wide audience, fulfill leadership tasks, gain teaching and supervision experience and participate in additional training.
- § provides resources for conference participation, establishing cooperations, and training measures

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MDC

The MDC provides the structures and resources for a successful postdoc phase. It supports postdoctoral researchers and their principal investigators and is responsible for quality assurance as outlined below in these guidelines.

CENTRAL POINT OF CONTACT FOR POSTDOCS

The MDC provides a central point of contact for career progression and development - the Postdoc Office. This Office has the task of supporting the implementation of the present guidelines, considering the specific structures at the MDC. The Postdoc Office provides access to career counselling, various professional skills training opportunities and career

³ As a rule, the principal investigator is the head of the research group or the direct superior. If the postdoc is funded by a scholarship, the scientific host will assume the principal responsibilities described here.

events on many topics important for careers within and outside academia. Special mentoring programs at MDC and within the MDC partner networks are available for MDC postdocs. The Postdoc Office will collect data in the form of online surveys (e.g., training, experience and review processes) to ensure the quality of offers.

GOOD SCIENTIFIC PRACTICE AND OMBUDS PERSON

The MDC ensures that research is carried out according to the principles of good scientific practice and that appropriate procedures are in place for handling scientific misconduct. The MDC is committed to its responsibility towards early-stage researchers, and to its obligation to convey the principles of good scientific practice and provide supervision according to good scientific standards.

POSTDOC NETWORKS AND REPRESENTATION

The MDC supports the Postdoc Association, a self-organized and self-run postdoc network, and associated interest groups. Postdocs are involved in relevant decision-making processes at the MDC by participating in the appropriate committees, for example the Career & Training Committee. Their principal investigators provide the necessary freedom for them to do so.

COMPATIBILITY OF PRIVATE LIFE AND CAREER

The phase after the doctorate requires not just higher scientific performance, but also often places demands on the balance between professional and private life. The MDC aims to provide optimal support for these challenges and specially to ensure family-friendly conditions. This includes, for example, assistance with finding childcare and flexible arrangements for working hours and location, equally for men and women. The MDC provides a Welcome & Family Office, offering support for international postdocs and postdocs with caring obligations (children or elderly relatives). Childcare is offered during MDC events and research- or conference-related trips.

TIMELINE OF THE POSTDOC PHASE

BEGINNING OF THE POSTDOC PHASE/RECRUITMENT

RECRUITMENT

The MDC welcomes individual, social and cultural diversity. The selection of postdocs should take place through a systematic and transparent procedure that guarantees equal opportunities and diversity.

Group leaders make autonomous decisions to offer potential candidates a postdoc contract. However, an emphasis should be placed on inclusive recruitment procedures and hiring of more qualified women and people of color to these positions taking into account the leaky academia pipeline⁴. The competencies expected of the candidates should be communicated clearly, along with the training and development opportunities available to them.

⁴ [Guidelines toward inclusive practices in Academics by eLife Community Ambassadors.](#)

INITIAL AGREEMENT

At the beginning of the postdoc phase, the principal investigator and the postdoc should meet (initial status meeting) to agree on the postdoc's specific research and development goals. These may include: developing a scientific profile, acquiring techniques, active participation in conferences, experience in staff management, training in "professional skills or other qualifications for a professorship. The results of the meeting should be documented by mutual agreement and should be revisited in the next meeting.

An initial status meeting should be held within six months (probation time), or before the end of the probationary period. This meeting can take the form of an employee development meeting.

It is recommended that postdocs prepare an individual development plan that is discussed regularly with the principal investigator within the context of annual status meetings. The agreements from these meetings should be shared with the Training and Career Center to develop adequate and interesting offers for the postdocs. The postdoc and the principal investigator can always contact the MDC Postdoc Office for additional advice.

For postdocs who arrive at MDC three years after completing their PhD, the initial agreement must be emphasized and concrete career options discussed to assist development within the limited time afforded by Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act (WissZVG).

DURATION OF THE WORK CONTRACT

Postdocs are generally employed for a limited period, four to six years. The duration of the work contract depends on the predefined qualification objectives. Other than exceptional circumstances, the contract should not run for less than two years. Extensions should – unless specifically justified – not be less than six months. At the beginning of the work at MDC, postdocs should be informed about the policies of Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act (Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz, WissZVG⁵) by the Personnel Service. In general, Personnel Service and Staff Council are available to discuss their contract conditions.

In accordance with the Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act any prolongation of the contract beyond 6 years should be justified by the principal investigator. A decision on contract prolongation should be communicated to the postdoc at least 6 months before the end of a contract.

FUNDING

The MDC welcomes postdocs who acquire prestigious external scholarships and provides them with comprehensive access to the supporting structures. At the same time, however, the MDC disapproves scholarships as an alternative to regular employment contracts. The principles of these guidelines apply to all postdocs regardless of their funding or employment relationship. The MDC will provide comparable net earnings to scholarship holders compared to contract holders.

⁵ [WissZVG \(Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz\)](#)

[English](#)

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POSTDOC PROJECT AND QUALIFICATION (YEAR 1-3)

STATUS MEETINGS

During annual status meetings, the principal investigator and the postdoc discuss progress regarding the agreed objectives, along with possible questions and problems for which the postdoc develops feasible solutions with the support of the principal investigator. The results of each meeting should be documented by mutual agreement and an appointment for the next status meeting made. Considering the lack of female leadership in academia, the status meetings with female postdocs should be an opportunity to clarify if female postdocs are experiencing particular barriers preventing the pursue of an academic career.

The Training and Career Center offers support and resources for these meetings if requested from the postdoc or principal investigator. In addition, the Training and Career Center can act as an advisor if specific questions regarding special competence programs arise.

SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITIES

High visibility of a postdoc's work is key to being recognized at the national and international levels. Principal investigators must therefore facilitate and encourage the postdoc's active participation at MDC seminars as well as local and international conferences. In addition, collaborative stays at research institutions and companies in Germany and abroad could be considered. In addition, the offering of scientific courses or lectures by postdocs should be encouraged by principal investigators.

LEADERSHIP AND TEACHING

Researchers should gain experience of personnel management and teaching during their postdoc time. This includes supervising bachelor's and master's theses, co-supervising doctoral candidates and other staff, and the opportunity to teach. There should be a mutual agreement between postdoc and principal investigator on the capacity of the postdoc for supervision and postdocs should receive regular feedback and training on their supervisory and teaching activities.

CAREER GUIDANCE AND FURTHER QUALIFICATION

The MDC Postdoc Office offers professional advice and training opportunities, provides information about existing mentoring programs and makes recommendations regarding further training. This service is also available to principal investigators who supervise postdocs.

FINAL POSTDOC PHASE AND CAREER AFTER THE POSTDOC PHASE (FROM YEAR 3)

CAREER DEVELOPMENT MEETING

In addition to the regular status meetings, the principal investigator and the postdoc should have an in-depth career meeting, which should take place at the latest in the postdoc's third year after completing their PhD. The meeting aims to assess the postdoc's research performance and career aspirations.

Postdocs interested in pursuing scientific careers, that are currently poorly represented at senior levels, should be helped in particular to deal with existing barriers - networking, self-esteem. In general, a clear plan is established for how projects will be divided when postdocs complete their training.

For this meeting, in addition to the principal investigator, a further mentor (e.g. the postdoc's external mentor) can be involved to help realistically assess the prospects of success in a scientific career and/or to explore possible non-academic career prospects.

The postdocs independently obtain feedback from the principal investigator and mentors within and outside academia.

CAREER WITHIN THE MDC

To accomplish its mission, the MDC aims to recruit and retain scientists with the best academic track records, even though there is no automatic progression to the next scientific position at the center itself. A structured and transparent procedure for a further career at the MDC and the appointment of permanent positions is in place⁶. In general, transitions for postdocs to advanced, time-unlimited positions are limited.

END OF THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

Six to four months before the end of the employment contract/scholarship, all stakeholders should agree on the possibility of continued employment. Furthermore, at the end of the postdoc / prior to termination of the employment, a final meeting should be held between the principal investigator and the postdoc to review their cooperation and the postdoc's personal development and to assess potential further collaboration. The principal investigator should provide the postdoc with an appropriate reference letter upon request and at least 3 months before the end of the employment.

⁶ [Handling of temporary contracts at MDC](#)