

Statement of postdocs working at GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel on the draft for ‘Guidelines for the Postdoc Phase within the Helmholtz Association’ (Nov 1, 2017)

On November 27, 2017, a group of 20 postdoctoral researchers working on fixed-term contracts at GEOMAR met to discuss the draft for ‘Guidelines for the Postdoc Phase within the Helmholtz Association’. Most but not all participants were members of the Integrated Marine Postdoc Network (IMAP) in the Cluster of Excellence ‘The Future Ocean’, a network of more than 130 marine science postdocs working at the partner institutions of the Cluster in Kiel.

Postdocs working at GEOMAR deeply appreciate the effort of the Helmholtz Working Group ‘Postdoc Guidelines’ to develop a general framework addressing the situation of non-permanent scientific staff within the Helmholtz Association, by developing common quality standards for the postdoc phase. In this respect, the definition of a minimum contract length of two years for postdocs is one important step. As the group directly affected by these guidelines, we would like to take the chance to present our views and ideas with respect to the present version of the guidelines.

We welcome the intention to establish quality standards and to provide general guidelines for the postdoc phase in a common framework addressing all Helmholtz Centres. Such framework will ensure a common understanding of the central role of the postdoc phase for career development of individual researchers, as well as a recognition of the significant contributions that postdocs in the Helmholtz Association make to solving the grand challenges facing science, society, and economy. We further suggest that this framework should in addition be taken as the basis for developing guidelines tailored to the particularities of each specific Centre.

However, we, as members of the postdoc community at GEOMAR, wish to comment on the recent draft of postdoc guidelines:

1. Definition of ‘postdoc’, their qualification goals and the ‘four-year rule’

We strongly support defining different stages in career development during the postdoc phase. We wish to emphasize that young researchers must be supported in being aware of existing career opportunities and career paths within the Helmholtz Association and beyond and how they can best achieve their career goals.

At present, the guidelines define postdocs by up to four years after their Ph.D. However, it reflects reality only in part because (i) many postdocs within the Helmholtz Association, and especially those from or returning from countries abroad, may be more advanced in their career (e.g., second or third postdoc) and (ii) in most cases a postdoc period of four years is simply not sufficient to fulfil the requirements of subsequent career steps (professorship, junior research group, permanent position). These different career stages must be appropriately termed (i.e. ‘postdoc’ for <4 years after Ph.D. and ‘senior scientist’ for >4 years after Ph.D.). This should be considered in the guidelines in order to be internationally coherent and most importantly it should be clear that a senior scientist with more than four years postdoc experience is on the academic career track.

Against this background, career checkpoints play a crucial role in defining a postdoc’s career path. We thus support the introduction of a mandatory career development meeting the latest after four years of being postdoc although four years into an academic career is rather late and may hinder opportunities outside academia. We suggest to establish frequent and especially realistic career checks, most prevalent at the early postdoc phase. Meetings at crucial stages of a postdocs’ career must be accompanied by the postdoc’s

supervisor, a truly external active researcher in the postdocs' research field as well as an external person knowledgeable of career paths and their requirements, ideally including diverse career tracks within the Helmholtz and the university system as well as outside academia. This includes transparency about which positions will become available and when, and the Centres' strategies to fill them – with internal staff or by international recruitment. Both paths should be possible, however, against a framework of clear and transparent processes and criteria.

2. Gender equality and compatibility of family and career

The postdoc phase is a critical phase in the life of young researchers because often both career development as well as family planning fall into this period. This should be respected and supported in the future postdoc guidelines – as it partly is already. Apart from coordinated support through the administration of the Centres, the following measures should be included: (i) support of child care through the Helmholtz Centres, e.g. offering in-house facilities or sufficient and allocated slots in public facilities in the neighbourhood of the Centres, (ii) part time working options, and (iii) raised awareness for the situation of researchers with family obligations, especially within the group of senior scientists (i.e. the decision makers).

3. International mobility

International mobility is an important experience in a researcher's life and many postdocs at the Centres are internationals or return from abroad. Supporting the mobility of scientists in the postdoc phase is very welcome. However, given individual family responsibilities and considering that abroad experiences may have been made previously, the timing of a research stay abroad should remain flexible with respect to the individual career plans and should not be made an additional requirement during the postdoc phase. Here, it should be clarified in the guidelines, that opportunities for research stays abroad exist and that additional funds can be provided by the Centres if requested by the postdoc.

4. Career development and realistic career paths

In contrast to most universities, one strength of the Helmholtz Association is the comparably large body of permanent research staff below the professorship level. Successful work by talented young scientists should be recognized by the Centres and talent management instruments developed by the Association should be equally available to postdocs working at all Helmholtz Centres. With the Helmholtz Young Investigator groups, for instance, the Helmholtz Association has created the unique tenure track system to retain their best talents – one of the key missions of the Helmholtz Association. Thus, this instrument should be generally implemented at all Helmholtz Centres (which is, for instance, currently not the case at GEOMAR). Here, funding schemes might be re-considered.

Early-career scientists are willing to face hard challenges but part of their working time should be specifically dedicated to further career development, which includes trainings for skill development, and most importantly, the freedom for developing an individual research and teaching profile and widening their networks, support in proposal writing, etc. In the case of classical project postdocs this may be facilitated by contractually guaranteeing a certain amount of time (e.g., 25%) for independent research and career development.

The Helmholtz Association now has the chance to make a difference by creating more predictable career paths such as a tenure track system that would have positive effects on the quality of science and gender balance in academia.

5. Implementation

Postdoc Offices may be an effective measure to help implement the guidelines, to ensure transparency of processes and to provide support for the postdoc community at the Centres, which naturally encounters a high flux of personnel (fixed-term employment, international mobility, etc.). It would be desirable to establish them at the interface between postdoc, advisor, and host Centre with tight connections to local universities (e.g., for joint training measures and teaching opportunities – a requirement for a habilitation and university careers). The IMAP network of the Cluster of Excellence 'The Future Ocean' in Kiel could serve as an incubator for these types of offices. It should be ensured, however, that the financial resources required to establish and maintain these offices are not raised at the expense of funding research.

6. Representation at executive committees

Non-permanent research staff plays a key role in solving the grand challenges facing science, society and the economy within the Helmholtz Association which should be acknowledged with regards to all decision-making processes. Therefore, postdoctoral researchers should be properly represented in executive committees within the Helmholtz Centres and the Helmholtz Association, ideally with voting rights.

Furthermore, we encourage the foundation of a Helmholtz-wide postdoc network following the example of the Helmholtz Juniors at the Ph.D. student level. This is desirable to provide a platform for Helmholtz-wide exchange and would help to ensure equal career opportunities for postdocs at all Helmholtz Centres.

Kiel, November 30, 2017

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