

## The Postdoc Phase at GESIS

- Promotion and Requirements -

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## 1 Introduction

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GESIS takes responsibility for promoting junior scientists. The support provided by GESIS addresses different areas and encompasses a set of measures. Its objectives and structures are founded on the *Guidelines for the working conditions and career development of pre-doctoral and post-doctoral scientists within the institutes of the Leibniz Association*. The GESIS Doctoral Programme for graduate students was introduced in 2016; in addition, personnel development measures intended for all GESIS employees have been put into practice, for example enabling "guest stays for GESIS employees" or "further training at GESIS."

On top of specifically promoting and supporting doctoral students and implementing personnel development instruments intended for all GESIS employees, GESIS is aware of the specific characteristics of the career phase of scientists after the conferral of a doctorate and wants to provide employees in this qualification phase with a structured support scheme.

GESIS sees a particularly high need for support among post-doctoral scientists who are employed in fixed-term positions – largely due to the "Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz" (German law on fixed-term contracts in higher education research) – and require support with regard to scientific qualification and career development. This group of post-doctoral employees in fixed-term positions will be referred to as postdocs in this paper. This includes all post-doctoral employees who have responsibilities in research and hold positions that are financed either internally by the budget or are externally funded. The conferral of a doctorate and the phase following it open up manifold career paths and opportunities. Scientists holding a doctorate can pursue a scientific activity which culminates in a professorship, opt for a career path as an expert or manager in a non-university institution, or switch to a career outside of science. From the point of view of GESIS, the postdoc phase ends when a fixed-term contract is converted into a permanent one, because a possible career goal has then been reached. The scientific qualification phase can, however, continue beyond this point in time – for instance, if a scientist aspires to a professorship. GESIS supports further qualification of this kind in the same way as it promotes further qualification of all its employees within the framework of its vocational training scheme, the support provided to research, and specific regulations governing teaching activities at universities.

Depending on an individual's career plan, various positions and career paths can be of interest. Furthermore, diverse competences and/or a specific skill profile are needed for postdocs to successfully achieve their career goal. Supporting postdocs with their individual career paths is of central importance for GESIS.

This strategy paper therefore draws up the following: the framework conditions for postdocs at GESIS, the support provided to post-doctoral employees during this qualification phase as well as the requirements post-doctoral scientists are expected to meet and the associated responsibilities they have to assume. After that, the paper will set out the goals and measures for further developing the current conditions for postdocs.

## Framework conditions and status quo

In accordance with the institute's mission statement and medium-term strategic plan, GESIS has set itself the task of supporting its "pre-doctoral and post-doctoral employees with their career development" (Program Budget 2019, human resources main objective). This strategic positioning makes it clear that postdocs and their further qualification are of major importance to GESIS. The aim is to bundle the existing structures and measures, make them transparent, and extend them in specific areas. Against this backdrop, the following section starts by describing the existing framework conditions that shape the working environment of postdocs at GESIS.

GESIS initially stipulates a duration of four years for the postdoc phase. Generally, post-doctoral employees are therefore granted a fixed-term, four-year employment contract.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the "Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz", the purpose of this employment period is to promote academic qualification. For this reason, the support provided by GESIS mainly focuses on providing qualification measures for academic activities. However, the institute is aware that not all postdocs will (be able to) remain in academia after these four years. Furthermore, today's scientists are required to have a diverse range of competences. The institute therefore supports the acquisition of competences that go beyond an exclusively scientific qualification.<sup>2</sup>

GESIS offers its post-doctoral academic staff a broad range of research- and service-related tasks. Postdocs play an important role for GESIS as they apply for and carry out research and infrastructure projects and actively enhance the image of GESIS within the scientific community with their publication and presentation activities. Depending on the responsibilities of a postdoc, he or she already trains various competences at GESIS by conducting a range of activities such as working independently on scientific projects, working in teams, and managing projects. As a rule, the job descriptions of internally financed postdocs stipulate that 30 % of their standard working time should be spent on research in order to promote science-related work at GESIS (see paper on *Scientific career opportunities at GESIS*).

The research-based service offered by GESIS provides employees with the opportunity to apply their scientific competences. This professional practice and experience is an important component of qualification, in particular for team and project management positions at GESIS, universities, and scientific institutions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, GESIS supports the acquisition of didactic competences for academic teaching by enabling employees to attend didactic further education programs. The institute also promotes the practical application of such competences; employees can carry out preparatory and follow-up activities for one course during their working time.<sup>4</sup> If employees are working toward a habilitation (a pre-professorial qualification in Germany), they can prepare and follow up two additional courses during their working time.

Scientific qualification and networking within the scientific community is crucial for the individual career planning and development of postdocs and also of significant importance for the visibility and

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<sup>1</sup> Providing that the contract period does not exceed the maximum fixed-term contract period.

<sup>2</sup> Providing that it is in the interest of GESIS, c.f. employment tax guideline R 19.7 <http://einkommensteuerrichtlinien.de/LStR-19-7-Berufliche-Fort-oder-Weiterbildungsleistungen-des-Arbeitgebers.html>

<sup>3</sup> C.f. Guidelines for the working conditions in the institutes of the Leibniz Association, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> The regulations regarding teaching are set out in a letter which was sent to academic staff on 27.12.2016 [http://intranet.gesis.intra/Verwaltung/Personal/Dokumente%20zu%20wissenschaftlicher%20Karriere/Schreiben%20zum%20Thema%20Lehre\\_2016\\_12.pdf](http://intranet.gesis.intra/Verwaltung/Personal/Dokumente%20zu%20wissenschaftlicher%20Karriere/Schreiben%20zum%20Thema%20Lehre_2016_12.pdf).

reputation of GESIS. Thus, post-doctoral employees are expected to attend (international) conferences and to present their research work there. In addition, GESIS actively supports systematic exchanges with partner institutions and universities within the framework of stays abroad (c.f. *Guest Stay abroad of GESIS staff*).

The further and continuing education programs offered by GESIS are both needs-based and competence-oriented within the framework of the institute's continuing education concept. The discussion of individual continuing education needs is an important component of annual staff appraisal. Further qualification and personnel development activities are important to GESIS, as shown by the fact that these activities can be performed during working time. They include taking advantage of continuing education opportunities, networking, or studying literature.

## 2 Objectives

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The personnel development of all employees is of crucial importance to GESIS. GESIS also wants to pay particular attention to the specific concerns and challenges with which postdocs are confronted. As an employer, the institute strives to create an environment that is attractive for highly qualified academic staff and that further enhances the visibility and connections of GESIS within the scientific community.

To specifically promote postdocs, GESIS has therefore set itself the following strategic objectives:

**GESIS shall provide conditions that enable postdocs to be optimally qualified in order to successfully pursue their career path.**

**By pursuing research at their own responsibility, postdocs at GESIS shall actively shape the GESIS research program and help GESIS to further develop its research-based infrastructures.**

To achieve these objectives, three points are important: First, with regard to orientation, what career path does the postdoc envisage? Second, which specialization is needed or which competences have to be improved during the postdoc phase in order to help the postdoc achieve his or her personal career goals? Third, how can the tasks and working conditions that shape this qualification phase be structured and communicated in a transparent manner?

Accordingly, GESIS has set itself the following operational objectives:

**Creation and communication of offerings and structures that support career planning and the pursuit of career goals.**

**Transparent structure and communication of requirements and funding that shape the working conditions at GESIS in the postdoc phase.**

## 3 Measures

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### Creation and communication of measures

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, GESIS provides different offers which can be adapted to the respective situation of an individual postdoc. On the one hand, some measures are intended to foster orientation and specialization, whereas, on the other hand, others promote networking and exchange. Participation in these measures is voluntary and requires the approval of an employee's supervisor.

### Orientation measures

As already mentioned, a range of career opportunities are open to postdocs. GESIS strives to support and mentor its post-doctoral employees, providing them with orientation regarding their career path and helping them to select suitable measures for achieving their career goals. Doctoral students can already start considering their career path toward the end of their doctoral studies, and their GESIS supervisors can already start actively supporting them at this time (see doctoral program concept). In addition, GESIS offers **orientation measures** to help employees reach and implement decisions. The following measures are particularly helpful for orientation.

- The career talk which is held once at the beginning of the postdoc phase with the postdoc, his or her team leader, and the head of department. In this talk, the postdoc's development prospects are discussed, agreed on, and documented; GESIS also sets out the requirements for obtaining a permanent contract. This talk is mandatory for postdocs holding internally funded positions. The purpose of the career talk is therefore to provide career orientation and help with career planning.
- The staff appraisal has the explicit purpose of discussing personnel development and is therefore an additional instrument for fostering career development and planning and for providing orientation. The staff appraisal refers to the development prospects and goals that were agreed on in the previous career talk or staff appraisal and sets out additional qualification objectives and continuing education measures if necessary. It provides a useful link between career planning and career development.
- (Discipline-specific) coaching sessions which provide postdocs with support and mentoring during the orientation phase and during the postdoc period. These sessions are not a form of scientific supervision but above all provide organizational, personal, and social mentoring during the qualification phase.
- GESIS also encourages its postdocs to seek mentors outside of the institute – in particular, if they require advice that cannot be provided by GESIS staff.



Measures:

- introduction of the career talk and drawing up of a guideline which sets out the procedure for the talk and its documentation;
- collection and description of the specific characteristics of the staff appraisal with a postdoc, creation of an interview guideline for the staff appraisal based on these characteristics;
- information of the heads of team and department about the career talk and the special features of staff appraisal with postdocs;
- development and establishment of a coaching program.

### Specialization measures

If an employee is aiming at a specific career path, he or she has to focus on acquiring and practicing pertinent abilities and competences. Depending on an individual's career path and career trajectory to date, continuing education and training needs can vary considerably from person to person. GESIS wants to meet these individual needs with **specialization measures** which help employees to acquire the competences they need to reach their career goals. These measures encompass both the acquisition of specialist skills and general skills as well as networking and exchange opportunities.

### Specialist skills and general skills

The acquisition of specialist competences is of great importance for qualification during the postdoc phase because professional expertise is a basic prerequisite for any future career path. In addition, general skills such as time management, project management, or leadership skills are relevant for a successful career. Depending on an employee's existing personal and specialist competences, GESIS fosters the development and extension of both skill areas.

Employees can acquire specialist and general skills by attending specific continuing education and training programs, by conducting their research activities, and by gaining practical experience during employment at GESIS. Within the framework of the GESIS continuing education concept, on the one hand, postdocs can attend internal continuing education programs offered by the GESIS training department and sign up for the continuing education courses bundled by the administration or, on the other hand, seek specific continuing education and training programs independently and then apply for financial support from GESIS.

The two competence areas – i.e., specialist and general skills – are interlocked when writing scientific papers, applying for external funds, or holding lectures, as they are both crucial for successfully carrying out these activities. This is a particular strength of GESIS and its working conditions. On the one hand, employees have the opportunity to acquire specialist and general further qualifications in courses and, on the other hand, they can apply and implement what they have learned in practice in a varied and versatile work context.

Measures:

- regular identification of the further qualification needs of postdocs and extension of the continuing education program depending on their needs;

- bundling and communication of the continuing education courses that meet the needs of postdocs.

### Networking and exchange

The academic qualification and cross-disciplinary networking of researchers are of crucial importance for GESIS. Well networked postdocs not only develop their own reputation but also raise the visibility of GESIS in the scientific community. This can, in turn, lead to new research projects and partnerships and help increase the quantity and quality of research output.

GESIS promotes and supports the networking of postdocs both within and outside of the institute with the following measures:

- Organization of a regular (annual) networking day for postdocs (GESIS postdoc networking day).
- The contact person, who is responsible for the Doctoral Program, is also the contact person for postdocs. The job title will therefore be changed to "Nachwuchsbeauftragte/r für Promovierende und Postdocs" (Delegate in charge of young academics).
- Appointment of a person who is responsible for implementing and driving forward the concept.
- (Self-)organization by postdocs. This takes the form of setting up and maintaining an e-mail distribution list for the group and the election of a postdoc spokesperson for each location who is responsible for representing the interests of post-doctoral scientists and for acting as a contact person for communication with the institute management, administration, internal bodies, and with external parties (e.g., Leibniz Association).
- Close links between post-doctoral employees within the Leibniz Association, in particular between those in Section B. This can take the form of close exchanges with other postdoc networks within the Leibniz Association with a view to opening up opportunities for cooperative partnerships or projects on specific topics, or junior research group leadership and support funds.
- The attendance of conferences is an important component for the further qualification of employees in the postdoc phase. In addition, research periods both in other parts of Germany and abroad can promote specialist and general skills and offer a particularly favorable opportunity for networking and exchange. As part of the GESIS internationalization strategy, the institute has set up structures and made resources available which support research periods of up to three months.

### Framework and working conditions

The requirements and funding structures shall be presented and communicated in a transparent manner, facilitating orientation regarding the offerings and framework conditions at GESIS for postdocs.

As already mentioned, this concept for promoting postdocs is based on existing support measures for all employees at GESIS. Combined with the measures described in the previous section, postdocs employed by GESIS benefit from an interesting work environment in which they can apply diverse compe-

tences. The working conditions and areas of activity of postdocs at GESIS therefore also support the acquisition and consolidation of competences.

The activities of postdocs take on an important role at GESIS and are supported by the following measures:

- introduction of a dedicated "postdoc" staff category for monitoring this group and its concerns;
- transparency regarding the tasks assigned to postdocs and the processes for being granted a permanent position;
- at least one career talk held at the beginning of the postdoc phase to discuss career orientation and planning and to set career goals and appropriate measures;
- staff appraisal held at least once a year to explicitly talk about career planning, management, and progression, taking into account the specific characteristics of the postdoc phase.

The introduction of a staff category dedicated to "postdocs" enables the institute's administration to take better account of the specific concerns of postdocs. The definition set out at the beginning of this paper shall be applied to determine whether an employee falls into this category or not. Grouping postdocs together in this category in a structured manner makes it easier to organize and address the group.

To render working conditions transparent, it is also necessary to systematically ensure that postdocs are able to devote the proportion of their working time to research which is set out in their contracts. It is in the interests of both parties that this research time is used. It provides postdocs with a basis for their scientific qualification and is in the interest of GESIS as a provider of research-based services. Postdocs can arrange this research time flexibly providing that they coordinate their activities with their supervisors and that research fits in with their other responsibilities. The possibility of being awarded a permanent position and the associated requirements are set out in the GESIS career paper.

As already mentioned, the career talk and staff appraisal are important components for career planning. These talks should focus on career opportunities and goals as well as on qualification needs, time management for the remaining contractual term, and the determination of appropriate interim steps. These points are discussed and refined with the aim of aligning the career objectives of postdocs with the analysis of their potential by their supervisors, and the employment opportunities within and outside of GESIS. In addition, the talk includes reflection on and discussion of the competences that need to be extended and the setting of priorities.<sup>5</sup> The performance that the employee is expected to deliver is also discussed with specific reference to his or her concrete activity at GESIS with a view to him or her eventually applying for a permanent position. The talks are documented and can feed into an individual development plan<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> c.f. Guidelines for the working conditions at the institutes of the Leibniz Association, p. 5f

<sup>6</sup> c.f. <http://intranet.gesis.intra/AGs/Post-Docs/Freigegebene%20Dokumente/Stanford%20 IDP-Initial.pdf>

## 4 Quality control and schedule

To optimally support its employees in the postdoc phase, GESIS has set up structures and made resources and a contact person available. Postdocs shall already be informed about the support they receive, as set out in this strategy paper, when they are recruited. The support structure and measures will be regularly reviewed and further developed (e.g., by interviewing the target group of the support program).

Date	Milestone	Actor
08/2017	Approval of the strategy	Institute management
10/2017	Communication and cross-departmental publication of the strategy and its implementation	Coordinator, management
From 1/2018	Implementation of orientation and specialization courses	Administration and coordinator
4/2018	1 <sup>st</sup> networking day for postdocs	Coordinator and postdocs
4/2018	Election of postdoc spokesperson	Postdocs
2022	Evaluation and revision of the strategy and measures	Executive level (referent)