

Postdoc Working Groups

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Working as a postdoc in the humanities, in university structures, often is far from easy and can be a very solitary task being between different status groups or burdened with a variety of jobs, depending on the concrete position and the amount of administrative work to be shouldered. Getting beyond ones own topics, and even more beyond disciplinary boundaries, can be a challenge. This is where Postdoc Working Groups come into play.

I, myself, was just starting to design and plan a postdoctoral research project, when I encountered this very format. It allowed me to dive into research debates far away from my topics before and at the same time to do postdoctoral work par excellence. Being a postdoctoral researcher in the humanities at a university can feel like a version 2.0 of being a PhD student with half a position—there is some research to be done, in a very specific field, writing, reading and, or presenting. Next to it, there are administrative tasks, jobs as research for others, or teaching assignments. Getting out of boxes and silos, while getting deeper and deeper into a topic, is no automatism. At the same time, seeing being a postdoctoral researcher as an episode and step, it does not suffice to just connect narrowly with other researchers and get deeper into a specific field of research. This can be reached with attending conferences or via specific publications. What is lost on this way are often the looser ends of research topics, the connections not at the centre of one's very own work, but nonetheless highly important and defining for one's own research. And this is what can be approached with others on similar positions and of similar status, being more into a concrete topic or similarly approaching a loose end, within the format of Postdoc Working Groups.

This is what the Postdoc Working Groups are for and have been for me. Following the one's conceptualization of these groups within the Cluster of Excellence "Africa Multiple," their outline is to be both interdisciplinary and international. They are "designed to create space for the joint discussion of research

results emerging from ongoing or starting projects” (Africa Multiple 2025). To this, it should be added again that results and topics can be more centre pieces or more new questions rising in one’s own research, making such a format even more enriching for all who participate—allowing for different perspectives, open questions, and high-profile discussions based on years of expertise.

To make this point more concrete, a reference to the Working Group I participated in helps: I was part of the Postdoc Working Group “Afr(io)futurism: Debates, Contestations, Interventions,” starting in Winter Term 2021/2022 (Africa Multiple 2021). My expertise was neither in Afrofuturism nor African-futurism, but I worked with the ideas of futures and alternative futures. Furthermore, I worked with and about African diasporas. Others highly active in the Postdoc Working Group were much closer to the topic, like Xin Li or Gilbert Ndi Shang, others had different approaches to the topic than me but much more a focus on Africa, as, for example, Britta Frede. However, coming together in one working group, all in all, this followed the idea of enriching each other, and it worked just this way. Next to this very goal to have an interdisciplinary exchange between postdoctoral researchers on a broad, but not too broad topic, the main win was to get in contact with fellows and guests. On the one hand, this was based on regular meetings as a Working Group—in our case most of the time online, it was pandemic times still—, on the other, we had events with a public impact, as a conference with international guests in our case. This allowed to enlarge the range of topics, expertise, but academics or activists connected to the overarching topic, too. In my personal case, this allowed to open my perspective to activist’s and multimedia approaches, approaches now much more in focus of my work than before.

While much postdoctoral work can be organizing for others or administering in a wider sense, the work as part of a Postdoc Working Groups allows, and allowed me personally, a very specific kind of ‘learning-on-the-job’—to organize events, to do the calculations of costs, to invite guests and handle the necessary administration, or to plan and advertise events. This, at the same time, is shared work, not an obligation of just one person, but part of the internal management of tasks and duties. For those in such a position already, this can be the gain: to organize own events, administer one’s own project; for others, as me, it prepares or prepared for future tasks, by learning from each other, not only content-wise, but in terms of organization, too. Yes, Working Groups “revolve around a specific topic suggested in the context of a call for working groups,” (Africa Multiple 2025) as it is described by the Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple,” but more to take this as a starting point to allow to

“promote innovative debates across disciplines and areas,” especially by organizing meetings across disciplinary boundaries and get others involved, too. This is a learning about other disciplines in a self-organized setting. While PhD projects allow to get deeper into one or some disciplines, get to know their structures, modes or debates, for interdisciplinary postdoctoral work, as it is fostered within the very interdisciplinary Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple,” exchange beyond these boundaries is key. Personally again, I learned by participating in my Postdoc Working Group how other disciplines work, how they debate, which questions arise within them, and how inter-, and in the end building on this, transdisciplinary approaches and connections are possible. Being a trained historian and political scientist, my approaches were clearly different from the other participants who were, e.g., Islamic studies scholars or literary scientists—but it was exactly this that allowed for new questions within my group, the disciplinary approaches, and questions of the others allowed new perspectives and questions for me.

It can be written and said that I would not be where I am right now in my research without the chances of the Postdoc Working Group. Indeed, the Postdoc Working Groups are not only “expected to promote innovative debates across disciplines and areas,” they truly did and do. Being a formalized but self-organized setting outside the ordinary university structures, outside established disciplinary or faculty structures, they can bring together some researchers otherwise not coming together. And part of this is an international exchange, too. Here again the inter- and transdisciplinary approaches are of major importance—as for most postdoctoral researchers I have expertise in and connections to certain regions and countries, mainly along certain disciplinary or expertise lines, but all else remains rather loose. And this proves to be a real gain; to be allowed to connect beyond these boundaries, within a structure and a mode. As within the Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple” itself, the emphasis is only partly limited, focusing on diasporic links, too, and by this including countries of the Americas, Europe or Asia, just this can be a benefit within the setting of a working format as the Postdoc Working Group. I myself could bring in a more America-centered perspective within our Postdoc Working Group, the others had different approaches and foci. But only together it proved fruitful and as gain for all.

And even looking beyond the actual academic gain, a valuable entry on the CV or new connections and networks, such a format allows to think outside the box, give new approaches a trial and allows to raise questions otherwise not asked due to disciplinary boundaries, expectations or alike. Such a format

can be testing ground for new ideas, for interdisciplinary approaches that do not have to pay out in the end necessarily. And maybe this is at least as much a gain as all new academic insights or connections. To understand and see which perspectives will prove fruitful for oneself, but in inter- and transdisciplinary connection, too, is highly important being a postdoctoral researcher. And this is important when starting a new project, just sorting the many ideas and paths that could be followed, but in the further stages, too. There is not always a field – and the financial means, too! – to test ideas, to question approaches and paths. To do it safely but within academic structures. But this is just what such Postdoc Working Groups can be. For me, they are allowed to question what new research questions to follow, how to position diasporic perspectives and think about futures, but also to include arts and activism in my research, by getting new inter- and transdisciplinary links. And at the same time, they showed limits, topics and approaches less fitting for my research or plainly not to be integrated into my postdoctoral research project. To ask this and test it, the format of Postdoc Working Groups proofed highly fruitful.

In this sense, many thanks for establishing such a format and making the establishment of support and networking structures on postdoctoral level such an integral part of the Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple.”

References

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