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Academic careers inside and outside academia—an overview of topics and contributions

Abstract: The scientific workforce is recognized as being key to the ability of modern economies to innovate, and in the ability of societies to solve current and avert future problems. However, the German science system is characterized by increasingly fierce competition and offers young researchers career prospects that are difficult to plan. This special issue aims to understand the social mechanisms of career decisions, chances, and paths of higher education graduates both inside and outside academia. It sheds light on employment trajectories and monetary returns, the embedding of careers in private and professional social networks, and academic recruitment processes. The contributions in this special issue provide latest research in a vibrant research field.

Keywords: academic careers, academia, PhD, post-doc, professorship

Akademische Karrieren innerhalb und außerhalb der Wissenschaft - ein Überblick über Themen und Beiträge

Zusammenfassung: Wissenschaftliche Arbeitskräfte gelten als Schlüsselfaktor für die Innovationsfähigkeit moderner Volkswirtschaften und für die Problemlösungsfähigkeit von Gesellschaften. Das deutsche Wissenschaftssystem ist allerdings von einem zunehmend härteren Wettbewerb geprägt und bietet jungen Forschenden schwer planbare Karriereperspektiven. Ziel des Sonderbandes ist es, die sozialen Mechanismen von Karriereentscheidungen und -chancen von Hochschulabsolvent:innen innerhalb und außerhalb der Wissenschaft zu verstehen. Er beleuchtet Beschäftigungsverläufe und monetäre Erträge, die Einbettung von Karrieren in private und berufliche soziale Netzwerke sowie akademische Rekrutierungsprozesse. Die Beiträge liefern aktuelle Forschungsergebnisse in einem dynamischen Forschungsfeld.

Stichworte: akademische Karrieren; Wissenschaft; PhD; post-doc; Professur

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Introduction

Many university graduates decide to stay in academia after their exams—at least for a limited period of time. In Germany, one in every fourth graduates enters the doctoral phase within the first 1.5 years following the exam (Fabian et al. 2016). However, there is a huge variation between subjects. While in medicine or the natural sciences the transition into the doctoral phase can be considered the norm, other subjects like education, economics and the humanities show considerably lower transition rates (Flöther 2021). And, of course, not all doctoral candidates successfully complete their doctorates (Jaksztat/Neugebauer/Brandt 2021).

The decision to (at least temporarily) stay in academia can be based on various considerations. While some graduates will be attracted by scientific work itself—because it offers intellectual challenge, the chance to solve scientific puzzles, to satisfy curiosity, and to further develop one's own scientific competencies—others will be attracted by the prospect of a further academic degree that can eventually improve their chances on the labor market and increase their monetary returns on education. Yet others will simply enter the doctoral phase by chance.

The scientific workforce is recognized as being key to the ability of modern economies to innovate, and in the ability of societies to solve current and avert future problems (European Commission 2022). In recent years, its great societal relevance has been clearly demonstrated, for example, by the global Covid-19 pandemic or by the numerous challenges imposed by climate change. The demand for scientifically trained staff is high and likely to continue to grow in the future.

At present, a large number of doctorate holders work outside academia—in public service, in company research and development departments, or in non-governmental organizations (Goldan/Jaksztat/Gross 2022); only a minority stays in academia in the long run. Inside and outside academia, careers can differ with regard to various aspects, for example, the employment situation, the degree to which formal academic qualifications are rewarded in terms of monetary and non-monetary returns, the relevance of further achievements for career progress (e.g., publications, international mobility experiences, raised research funds, or patents), or the career system.

Many higher education policy debates revolve around precarious employment conditions and necessary reforms of the academic career system (e.g., tenure-track professorships). The German science system is characterized by increasingly fierce competition and offers young researchers career prospects that are difficult to plan. Between 1992 and 2021, the number of professors at German universities¹ has increased from 34,700 to 50,260 (Figure 1). Within this time frame, however, the number of scientific staff below professorship status – who are largely employed on

1 Including universities of applied sciences, colleges of education, theological colleges, and art colleges.

a temporary basis – has more than doubled from 108,295 to 225,340. This restructuring has been accompanied by an increased proportion of third-party funded researcher positions. Accordingly, competition for resources and permanent positions, and the rigor of evaluation of achievements are increasing within academia (Rogge 2015).

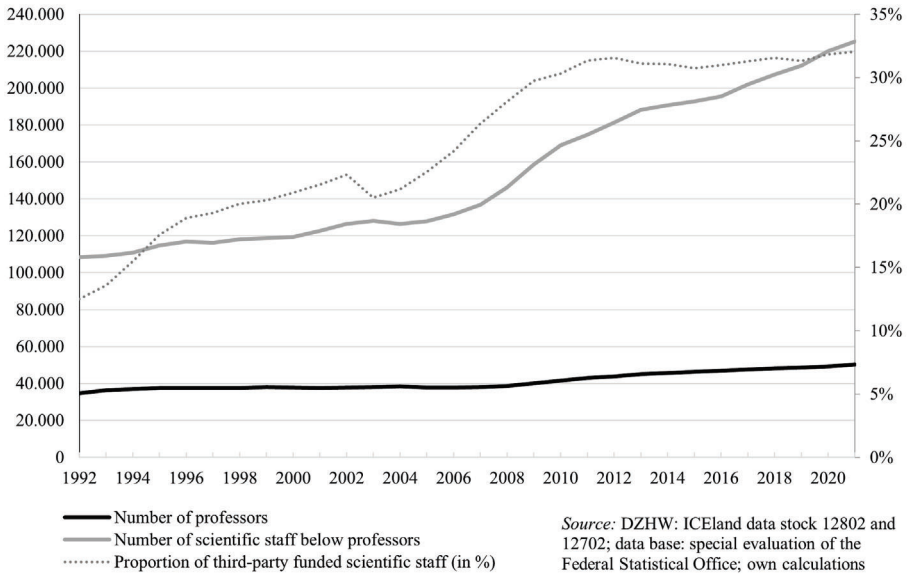


Figure 1: Number and funding of scientific staff at universities in Germany between 1992 and 2021

More than in other areas of society, in academia meritocratic principles are a functional imperative of the career system. Robert K. Merton (1973 [1942]) has described this norm as ‘universalism’; the recognition of academic achievements should only depend on objective performance criteria—regardless of social characteristics such as gender, social origin, or ethnicity. Although academia has established a variety of measures to ensure compliance with this principle, social inequalities remain an issue, for example with regard to promoting early career researchers or recruiting professors. There is still insufficient knowledge on potential social barriers to career success.

Individual careers both inside and outside academia are always embedded in private and professional social networks. And both can be considered as valuable social capital. As Leahey (2016) states, “academic research is increasingly social” (p. 82) and research collaborations are becoming more and more important—partly resulting from increased specialization of research. Collaborations can be beneficial with regard to various aspects, for example scientific productivity or access to

funding and resources (Leahey 2016). Especially in early career phases, supportive mentoring by experienced colleagues can be helpful when adapting to new work requirements, to develop professional skills, self-confidence and clear career ambitions. Private social networks can help to cushion psychological stress or to create space for greater career involvement. However, beside these benefits, a number of conflicts can arise in all of these areas. Research collaborations may, for example, suffer from freeriding, competition, and social tensions. Mentor-mentee relationships imply dependency structures and an unequal balance of power. Conflicts between the private and the professional life spheres can arise, for example, in connection with caregiving responsibilities or reconciling two careers within one partnership. Potential conflicts are especially evident with regards to the mobility requirements often connected with a research career.

In light of this situation, this special issue aims to understand the social mechanisms of career decisions, chances, and paths of higher education graduates inside and outside academia. Who decides to stay in academia following graduation, and why? Are career decisions and chances determined by social origin, gender, migration background, age, or intersections of these dimensions? Do the returns to education change over time due to reforms such as Bologna? Are there discipline-specific determinants of career success? What are the determinants for receiving a tenured position such as a professorship? Can we analyze these determinants from different perspectives? How do couples make mutual career decisions? Are cooperation patterns in science changing? Does cooperation foster new ideas and innovations?

The content of this special Issue

The content of this book is divided into three parts. The first part is about employment trajectories and returns to higher education. The second part is about social capital and collaborations. The third part will specifically focus on academic recruitment processes and appointments to professorships.

Employment Trajectories and Returns to Higher Education

The first two chapters in this section analyze changing returns to education in the light of educational reforms based on the DZHW Graduate Panel Study. While Kroher and Leuze (2024) consider the Bologna Reform and investigate its consequences in terms of inequalities within the labor market, Euler and Trennt (2024) focus on the higher education expansion and how it affects the returns to doctoral education. The following chapters 4 and 5 examine social inequalities in employment trajectories. However, while Bartsch et al. (2024) consider gender differences and combine two sources of administrative data (from a University and the Institute for Employment Research (IAB)), Goldan et al. (2024) focus on intersectional dropout from academia in Germany. The fifth and last paper by Höhle (2024) also examines dropout, but from a cross-national perspective focusing

on the role of national academic careers systems and how they affect dropout from academia, with a special focus on contract types.

In chapter 2 *Martina Kroher and Kathrin Leuze* ask whether the introduction of bachelor's and master's degrees in Germany has led to increased labor market inequalities among university graduates. To address this research question, the authors use data from the DZHW Graduate Panel Study. Labor market returns are analyzed through the lens of human capital theory, signaling theory and labor market segmentation theory. The focus of this paper is on career paths outside academia in particular. The authors show that bachelor graduates earn less and have a higher risk of inadequate employment in their first job after graduation compared to graduates with master's and traditional degrees. Internal labor market segments and extracurricular qualifications are among those factors contributing to degree-specific labor market outcomes. In a longitudinal perspective, the vertical differentiation of degrees appears to have been accompanied by an increased pay gap between graduates holding different degrees.

In chapter 3 *Thorsten Euler and Fabian Trennt* explore how the monetary returns to doctoral education have developed during the expansion of higher education. To achieve this goal, the authors use data from multiple cohorts of the DZHW Graduate Panel Studies, too. They argue that doctorate holders generally play an important role in knowledge-based economies, because being trained for complex and innovative tasks makes them especially productive workers. Thus, from the perspective of human capital theory, doctorate holders are expected to receive a wage premium on the labor market. However, theoretical expectations of how wage differentials between graduates with and without doctorates have evolved in a decade of higher education expansion are less clear (i.e., growing demand vs. oversupply). The authors show that the wage premium in the private labor market sector has remained stable over time—despite a growing number of doctorate holders entering the labor market. In the public sector, by contrast, doctoral degrees are rewarded with higher wages only to a limited extent.

In chapter 4 *Simone Bartsch, Guido Buenstorf, Anne Otto and Maria Theissen* explore employment trajectories of doctorate holders in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Their analyses are particularly devoted to gender differences in employment biographies (i.e., typical career paths, employment sectors, and employment volume). The authors make use of administrative data provided by the Technische Universität Berlin which was linked with the Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB) dataset of the Institute for Employment Research (IAB). Economic and sociological theories referring to social networks, identity formation, discrimination, and gender-specific norms and roles are guidelines for their empirical analyses. The study points to path dependencies between the type of doctoral training and post-graduation employment sectors. Female doctorate holders without children follow similar career trajectories to those of their male

peers. However, it also suggests that gender-specific effects of family formation on employment biographies are very pronounced.

Chapter 5 by *Lea Goldan, Aaron Bohlen and Christiane Gross* takes a closer look at social inequalities in postdoctoral dropout from academia. With reference to the concept of intersectionality, the authors investigate whether dropout is associated with doctorate holders' gender, social origin, and migration background. To answer this research question, they use data from the DZHW PhD Panel 2014 which allows them to study employment trajectories over a period of five years after doctoral graduation. Their results suggest that, within this time frame, most doctorate holders leave academia to be employed in other sectors. However, there is no evidence of inequalities regarding gender, social origin, and migration background or of intersections of these dimensions.

Chapter 6 by *Ester Höhle* also focuses on dropout of doctorate holders. However, her study investigates how intentions to leave academia are influenced by characteristics of national academic career systems and individual employment contracts in particular. Career decisions are studied through the lens of social-cognitive career theory and labor market concepts. A special feature of this study is that data from ten European countries are used (EUROAC data), which allows for comparisons between different academic employment systems. The author shows that in up-or-out systems (e.g., Germany, Switzerland, Austria) postdocs more often intend to leave academia compared to postdocs in tenure systems (e.g., Netherlands, United Kingdom, Ireland). In both systems, fixed-term employment contracts are associated with leaving intentions. Although both job satisfaction and integration appear to act as mediating factors, neither indicator fully explains the effect of the contract.

Social Capital and Collaborations

Within the second part, we present contributions that cover the role of academic and private social capital and how it affects academic career decisions and knowledge production. In the first contribution, Elhalaby and Epstein (2024) have chosen a qualitative perspective on the experiences with collaboration in the life sciences; followed by the bibliometric perspective from Wieczorek et al. (2024) that considers the consolidation of thoughts/ideas as outcome. The next two contributions focus on dyadic constellations. However, while Mühleck and Schwabe (2024) analyze mentoring teams in the light of gender combinations, Schels et al. (2024) takes a closer look at how dual career couples at the high end of academic careers make career decisions, using a mixed-methods approach with data on applicants for European Research Council grants.

In chapter 7, *Christina Elhalaby and Nurith Epstein* explore how postdocs in the life sciences describe their experiences with collaborations. To address this research question, the authors have conducted qualitative interviews with physician scientists and biologists. The interview material was analyzed using qualitative content analy-

sis. The concepts of social capital and social interdependence serve as the theoretical framework for their analyses. The authors show that the perceived benefits of collaborations generally outweigh the negative aspects. Most importantly, collaborative networks provide access to certain resources that are indispensable for conducting research projects successfully. These include other people's human capital (i.e., professional knowledge and experiences) and also technical resources. Interviewees moreover highlight learning from collaborative partners and increased productivity as positive aspects. As possible pitfalls of collaborative research, the authors identify conflicts due to competition, coordination and communication costs, prioritization issues, and freeriding.

Chapter 8 by *Oliver Wieczorek, Andreas Schmitz, Jonas Volle, Khulan Bayarkhuu, Julian Dressler and Richard Münch* studies the effects of research collaborations from a bibliometric viewpoint. Their contribution explores the association between types of collaborative research and the consolidation of thought products in sociology (i.e., theories, methods, and research foci). Their study is based on abstracts of articles published in the five most important German-speaking sociological journals between 2000 and 2019. It aims to analyze whether thought products have become more central or more peripheral within the academic discourse. The authors show that the number of institutions involved in a collaboration is positively associated with consolidation over time. Concepts used by scholars with a high centrality in collaboration networks at the beginning of the observation period tend to become more peripheral over time. Their analysis also points to gender inequalities as the proportion of female authors is negatively associated with the consolidation of thought products.

Chapter 9 by *Kai Mühleck and Ulrike Schwabe* explores whether or not doctoral candidates benefit from having a same-gender supervisor. Building on tokenism theory, identity-based motivation theory, and theories of social networks, they investigate supervisor-effects on satisfaction with mentoring, beliefs in own research abilities, and perceived career prospects. The authors address this research question using the DZHW-Nacaps data, which is a panel study with doctoral candidates at German universities. In order to account for possible selection biases in estimating the effect of same-gender matches, entropy balancing is applied. The study shows that both female and male doctoral students tend to choose supervisors of the same gender as themselves. However, contrary to expectations, female supervisors have a positive effect on satisfaction with mentoring and academic self-concept for both female and male doctoral students.

Chapter 10 by *Brigitte Schels, Sara Connolly, Stefan Fuchs, Channah Herschberg and Claartje Vinkenburg* focuses on the private social context of researchers' careers and especially on the challenges and dilemmas resulting from combining two careers within one partnership. Referring to normative expectations of the 'ideal scientist' and the concept of linked lives, the authors explore how careers are

prioritized within dual career couples and how researchers reflect on the challenges in combining both careers. The study uses a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data on scientists who applied for the most prestigious research grants in Europe, namely the European Research Council (ERC) grants. The stories in this chapter clearly illustrate the challenges and complexities resulting from coordinating two careers which are often related to questions of prioritization, mobility requirements, and childcare responsibilities.

Academic Recruitment Processes and Appointments to Professorships

The third and last part of this special issue includes papers that examine recruitment processes and appointments to professorships. While Blome (2024) uses narrative interviews to shed light on the autobiographical perspective of professors and the relevance of social class for their careers, Habicht et al. (2024) use homepage data to investigate gender effects on academic success. Ordemann and Naegele (2024) analyze age effects on academic success using survey data. Last but not least, Petzold and Netz (2024) examine experimental data on fictitious candidates for professorships to examine how signaling values of academic performance vary between disciplines.

Building on grounded theory methodology, chapter 11 by *Frerk Blome* asks whether social class is a relevant category in academic careers. Mechanisms of upward social mobility are studied on the basis of autobiographical narrative interviews with professors from law and education from German universities. Theories of the social self and social comparison theory form the background to this contribution. The study illustrates that socially mobile professors had to deal with more uncertainties regarding their academic careers compared to their colleagues from higher social class backgrounds, who had much clearer career ambitions from the start. The socially mobile professors had to develop confidence in their own abilities to a greater extent, based on positive external evaluations of their performance and through the social comparisons enabled by these evaluations. The study also points to the fact that being encouraged and supported by authoritative others is especially important for socially mobile scholars.

In chapter 12, *Isabel M. Habicht, Martin Schröder and Mark Lutter* focus on gender effects in academic recruitment processes in German sociology. Previous studies suggest that female sociologists have a considerably higher chance of becoming tenured professors compared to their male colleagues when controlling for productivity signals such as publications. To date, however, it remains an open question whether these findings are possibly biased due to a survivor effect, i.e., a methodological artifact caused by sampling strategies excluding individuals who have already left academia. To address this question, the authors replicate Lutter and Schröder's (2016) study using an extended and updated dataset. The empirical analyses show that the female advantage in German sociology does not diminish

when accounting for leaky pipeline effects. Explaining why female sociologists have greater chances of securing tenured positions remains a puzzle to be solved.

Chapter 13 by *Jessica Ordemann and Laura Naegele* discusses age as a potential source of inequality in academic recruitment processes. Referring to theoretical concepts such as age-stereotypes and age-based discrimination, they empirically explore how a scholar's biological and academic ages affect the chances of securing a tenured position in academia. The authors study the job transitions of German doctorate holders from a wide range of subjects using data from the DZHW PhD Panel 2014. The results of their event history analyses suggest that age plays a rather subordinate role for the chances of becoming tenured. On the contrary, compared to their younger colleagues, individuals who were 40 years of age and older at the time of PhD graduation become tenured postdoctoral researchers or professors at universities of applied sciences more quickly. It is possible that older doctoral graduates tend to aim at alternative pathways to tenure beyond university professorships.

In chapter 14, *Knut Petzold and Nicolai Netz* adopt a comparative perspective and ask whether certain signals of academic performance (i.e., the formal qualification, publication record, teaching experience, third party funding, as well as different signals of internationalization) are evaluated differently across disciplines. Unlike the other studies in this section, the authors explicitly focus on the perspective of gatekeepers in academic recruitment processes and explore how signals are valued in tenure decisions. Their analyses are based on a survey experiment with Germany-based university professors of German studies, selected social sciences, and chemistry, who have judged the suitability of fictitious candidates for professorships. The judgements reveal different disciplinary cultures in evaluating academic performance—especially when comparing chemistry and German studies. Differences are revealed with regard to formal qualifications, but also with regard to the acquisition of third-party funding and (international) publications.

We appreciate the wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches that together provide valuable pieces of a bigger puzzle. Enjoy!

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