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Sustainable Cutting-Edge Research through Fair Working Conditions: The Necessity of Transparent Collective Agreements for Doctoral Researchers in the Helmholtz Association

Recruiting top national and international talent is a major challenge in the highly competitive field of academic research and is of crucial importance to the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres (HGF). To succeed in the race for scientific progress, the HGF must offer attractive and reliable working conditions for its early-career researchers. In practice, however, individual contracts are predominantly concluded between the respective Helmholtz Centers and doctoral researchers, which reduces both the transparency of contract terms and the equal opportunity goals pursued by the HGF. As the voice of doctoral researchers within the HGF, the Helmholtz Juniors advocate for integrating all doctoral researchers employed at Helmholtz Centers into the collective agreement for the public sector (TVöD), pay grade E13. This is the only way to ensure fair and transparent working conditions and attract top-tier talent.

The following outlines the advantages of collective agreements over individual contracts, often referred to as funding agreements. In contrast, scholarships typically fail to provide the necessary social security and stability.

Collective Agreements Create Transparency

Science, as an international field of work, requires regulations that are transparent and understandable in an international context¹. In a statement on the amendment of the Act on Temporary Scientific Contracts (WissZeitVG), the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany warned against the risk of a confusing diversity of regulations and, in the worst case, disparities between institutions². The Max Planck Society, for example, offers at least standardized (funding) contracts, whereas the HGF features a remarkable diversity of contracts for doctoral researchers. The most common type of contract in the HGF is individual, non-tariff agreements with durations of two to four years and compensation ranging from 55% to 100% of a full-time position. Only about a third of the centers apply the TVöD on an individual basis. Despite having an application agreement with the United Services Union (ver.di), two Helmholtz Centers effectively exclude doctoral researchers from the collective agreement by invoking § 1 para. 2 letter s of the TVöD. Two other centers are affiliated with universities due to their historical development and therefore apply the collective agreement for the public service of the federal states (TV-L), which uses a different pay scale. This inconsistent and arbitrary patchwork of rules not only

¹ Helmholtz-Promotionsleitlinien (2019), online unter:
https://www.helmholtz.de/fileadmin/upload_Karriere/190520_Helmholtz_Promotionsleitlinien_DE.pdf

² Allianz der Wissenschaftsorganisationen, Stellungnahme 27. März 2023: Für attraktive wissenschaftliche Karrieren in Deutschland, online unter: Wissenschaftskarrieren ermöglichen – Kommentierung der Allianz der Wissenschaftsorganisationen zum WissZeitVG

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prevents transparency but also creates inequalities among doctoral researchers within the HGF. This undermines equal opportunity and makes working conditions difficult to understand from an international perspective.

Collective Agreements Ensure Equal Opportunity

Improving equal opportunity is a central priority in the HGF - this principle is firmly anchored in the HGF's mission and is an integral part of its talent management³. Through their uniformity, collective agreements are an important tool that can significantly promote equal opportunity across the HGF. Collective agreements establish a standardized minimum framework that is regularly negotiated publicly and applies to all doctoral researchers. They ensure standardized regulations for working hours and vacation, recognize professional experience in compensation, and provide social security through additional benefits such as occupational pension schemes. In contrast, individual contracts can vary significantly in content and are subject to the unilateral stipulations of funding bodies, such as the Federal Ministry for Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR), formerly the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), which define only maximum standards - allowing individual institutes to make downward deviations at their discretion. This opens the door to potential misuse and disadvantages for individual doctoral researchers. With collective bargaining, any changes to the agreement are automatically applied to all employment contracts. In contrast, individual contracts only reflect new rules in newly signed agreements. Thus, collective agreements ensure full transparency and lay the foundation for equal opportunity.

Collective Agreements Increase Attractiveness and Satisfaction

Sustainable and fair working conditions are not only key to long-term viability but also decisive for the lasting attractiveness and success of research institutions in an increasingly competitive academic landscape - a principle the Helmholtz Association already established in its 2016 sustainability management guidelines (LeNa). These guidelines emphasized the importance of developing new career paths and avoiding precarious employment, particularly for early-career researchers⁴. Competitive working conditions are the basis for attracting and retaining talented young scientists from both national and international backgrounds^{5,6}.

³ Helmholtz Homepage, online unter: www.helmholtz.de/ueber-uns/wer-wir-sind/zahlen-und-fakten-neu/talentfoerderung, Stand 2024

⁴ Ferretti, J. et al.: LeNa-Handreichung. Nachhaltigkeitsmanagement in außeruniversitären Forschungsorganisationen, 2016, online unter: https://www.helmholtz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/LeNa-Leitfaden_Nachhaltigkeitsmanagement_2016.pdf

⁵ Barcan, R. (2018). Paying dearly for privilege: conceptions, experiences and temporalities of vocation in academic life. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 26, 105-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1358207>

⁶ Reymert, I., Vabø, A., Borlaug, S.B. et al. (2023). Barriers to attracting the best researchers: perceptions of academics in economics and physics in three European countries. *High Educ* 86, 1173–1193 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00967-w>

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A 2020 study found that good working conditions and career prospects are key drivers of innovation in academic research⁷. Establishing good working conditions has twofold benefits: on the one hand, secure employment leads to higher satisfaction and productivity⁸; on the other hand, it enhances the employer's appeal to international top talent. Job satisfaction is therefore a critical factor in the attractiveness of the public science sector. By introducing transparent, uniform contracts based on binding institutional application of the TVöD for doctoral researchers, the HGF can offer its early-career researchers sustainable, fair, and favorable working conditions - ensuring the retention of young talent amid a shortage of skilled workers in the public research sector.

Collective Agreements Reduce Bureaucracy

The 2023 inflation compensation payment demonstrated that the diversity of contract types results in increased administrative workload and uncertainty among doctoral researchers. Introducing the collective agreement for all doctoral researchers would simplify administrative processes and create independence from the directives of funding bodies such as the BMFTR, since collective bargaining law overrides ministerial guidelines and authorizations. This benefits both researchers and administrative staff, fosters a coherent and efficient organizational structure, enhances transparency, and strengthens the Helmholtz Centers' appeal as employers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we emphasize that the binding institutional application of the TVöD without exception for all doctoral researchers at all Helmholtz Centers is a necessary measure. It aligns with the interests of the HGF by increasing its competitiveness in recruiting national and international talent, ensuring high satisfaction and productivity among researchers, promoting equal opportunity, and simplifying administrative processes. By supporting this initiative, the HGF can further strengthen its position as a leading actor in research and innovation.

Helmholtz Juniors

The Helmholtz Juniors represent around 8,000 doctoral researchers within the Helmholtz Association. They advocate for the introduction of collective agreements for doctoral researchers across the entire Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres. This position was unanimously adopted at the Helmholtz Juniors Annual Meeting in 2024.

⁷ Castellacci, F., & Viñas-Bardolet, C. (2020). Permanent contracts and job satisfaction in academia: evidence from European countries. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(9), 1866–1880. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1711041>

⁸ Bryson, Alex and Forth, John and Stokes, Lucy, Does Worker Wellbeing Affect Workplace Performance? IZA Discussion Paper No. 9096, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2655044> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2655044>