

# Statement by yHEP on the planned reform of the Act on Fixed-Term Employment Contracts in Academia (Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz)



26.05.2023

The German government has set out to significantly improve working conditions in science in Germany, which have so far been regulated by the Act on Fixed-Term Employment Contracts in Academia (WissZeitVG) [1]. In the coalition agreement, the goals were described as follows: *"In doing so, we want to significantly increase plannability and commitment in the post-doc phase and create prospects for alternative careers at an earlier stage. We want to link the contract terms of doctoral positions to the total expected project duration and work toward creating permanent positions for permanent tasks in science."* (translated from the German original) [2] The young High Energy Physicists association (yHEP) explicitly supports these goals.

On 17.03.2023, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has now presented a plan to reform the WissZeitVG [3]. Unfortunately, we have to note that the proposed changes to the WissZeitVG by the BMBF do not meet the goals formulated in the coalition agreement. In particular, the setting of the maximum fixed-term period for scientific employees after the doctorate to 3 years is not suitable to improve the plannability and commitment, but will contribute to the further precarization of working conditions in science.

We see the difficulty of the proposed reform in the simplistic consideration of the postdoc phase (R2) together with the phase as advanced junior researchers (R3)<sup>1</sup>. While in the postdoc phase, especially as the first position after the doctorate, a fixed term employment can be temporarily tolerated, this is no longer comprehensible in the R3 phase at the latest, and is destructive for the research and life planning of the scientists concerned. The R3 phase includes Emmy Noether Junior Research Groups, Helmholtz Young Investigator Groups, Max Planck Research Groups, ERC Starting Grants, W1 Junior Professorships, as well as the classic habilitation positions (*Akademische/r Rat/Rätin auf Zeit*). These positions can usually only be obtained after 1-2 postdoc appointments and have terms of 5-6 years. A maximum duration of 3 years for the entire R2+R3 phase will make these career paths in Germany more difficult or even impossible. Migration abroad or leaving science will be the logical consequence for these scientists.

In addition, fixed term employment from the R2 phase onwards, in contrast to the fixed term employment during a doctoral thesis (R1), can no longer be justified by a qualification in the strict sense of a university degree, since at the end of a postdoc there is no independent degree such as a doctorate, which can also be seen as beneficial in an industrial context.

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<sup>1</sup> The categorization corresponds to the definition by the European Commission [4].

Therefore, from the point of view of yHEP, a fixed term employment in the R2 phase can at most be justified by project durations, which means that here, quite clearly, no *individual scientific qualification* is the focus, which is, however, emphasized as an objective in the BMBF's reform proposal of the WissZeitVG [3]. For reasons of transparency, this should be noted in a future reform of the WissZeitVG.

In the R3 phase, which usually covers the essential years of life related to career and life planning - from 30 to 45 -, fixed-term employment is detrimental, both to research performance and to individual lifestyles. For women in particular, this phase is essential for family planning, and the lack of security provided by a permanent position can have a negative impact - either in terms of career or in terms of family planning, thus resulting in discrimination against women in academia. Working in temporary positions for several years also leads to self-selection, regardless of gender, so that only those who can afford the years of financial and life insecurity remain in the academic system, which is contrary to the intended merit-based science system. In yHEP's view, a reform of the WissZeitVG should aim to especially address this and translate the positions located in the R3 area into permanent positions. This does not necessarily require professorships, but the creation of permanent positions alongside professorships. If the proposed maximum duration of 3 years for the R3 phase was implemented, applications for professorships (W2/W3) from the R3 phase would practically only be possible from abroad. This would be equivalent to a massive cut in the attractiveness of Germany as a location for science, both for German and international researchers.

The commitment of the Federal Government in the coalition agreement to "*permanent positions for permanent tasks*" furthermore requires, in parallel to the already mentioned positions in the R3 area, the creation of permanent positions for technical and computing-related permanent tasks that do not correspond to a professorship and should not necessarily be assigned to a professorship. These positions require extensive knowledge and are essential for the successful, long-term and sustainable operation of the research infrastructure in the area of large-scale experiment research. In the current science system, the reduced publication output due to long development processes in these areas leads to additionally reduced career opportunities for scientists working in this field, and thus to highly insecure living conditions. A reform of the WissZeitVG must offer a solution for these scientists, otherwise Germany risks losing its leading role in the technological-scientific field and these critical specialists to industry or abroad.

We therefore call for a reform of the German science system that does not restrict employment opportunities but reliably creates more prospects beyond a professorship: so that a real improvement in working conditions is achieved and reliably plannable career paths are genuinely made possible. Science must not be open only to those who can afford to live and do research under precarious conditions. The self-selection that is currently taking place is at odds with the idea of merit in science and is not sustainable with regard to investments in research infrastructure and personnel. Top-level research requires top-level personnel, not personnel who are preselected and restricted in their lifestyle by precarious working conditions. yHEP is very happy to actively support the reform process with suggestions and critical debate - for a science that creates knowledge and the future in a fair and sustainable way.

This statement is the translation of the original statement in German, using the help of DeepL [5] for the translation.

- [1] <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/wisszeitvg/BJNR050610007.html>
- [2] <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/koalitionsvertrag-2021-1990800>
- [3] <https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/de/2023/230317-wisszeitvg.html>
- [4] <https://www.more-4.eu/indicator-tool/career-stages-r1-to-r4>
- [5] <https://www.deepl.com/translator>

The yHEP association represents scientists with non-permanent contracts in the fields of astroparticle physics, hadron and nuclei, as well as elementary particle physics. yHEP aims to understand and improve the situation of young scientists, to strengthen their involvement in decisions about the future of the field, and to provide a network of PhD students, post-docs, junior group leaders, junior professors and other non-permanent staff in these fields.