UNIVERSITÄT BIELEFELD
Career Service

Handout: Non-academic career paths for PhD students and postdoctoral researchers

Academic and non-academic careers are equally valid career paths – though they follow different logics. A non-academic career can be planned as a conscious decision at a specific point in time or considered as an additional option ('Plan B'). In both cases, giving early thought to your career goals broadens your scope for action.

As well as reflecting on one's own interests, skills and values, it is helpful to keep an eye on current economic, social and higher education policy developments. This context influences career opportunities both within and outside academia.

Typische Unterschiede in den Anforderungen seitens der Arbeitgebenden

Comparison	Academic Career Paths	Non-academic Career Paths
PhD	A PhD is a necessary prerequisite for advancing to the next stages of a career towards a professorship; it is also frequently required for other roles in academia, such as in academic administration; whilst not strictly necessary in these cases, it is highly beneficial.	A PhD is not required in many fields of work, unless those fields are research-oriented, such as non-university research institutions.

Performance indicators	Outstanding academic achievements are regarded as key performance indicators (publications, external funding, awards, visibility within the field; in some cases also teaching experience and experience of serving on academic committees).	Subject-specific and cross-disciplinary skills, as well as practical experience and their transferable value for professional practice, are often more relevant than academic achievements. It is very important to clearly translate academic skills into the language of the non-academic labour market.
Career Paths	The career path leading to a professorship is quite strictly defined (PhD – postdoc – Habilitation or work relevant to Habilitation – appointment, or via the tenure-track model) and takes approximately 10–12 years or longer after graduation. This period is often characterised by several fixed-term appointments, a high degree of (international) mobility and a competitive environment.	Career paths vary greatly depending on the sector and employer, and are subject to change depending on labour market trends. It is important to clarify your individual profile in order to identify a suitable fit for specific fields of work and roles, and to be able to communicate this to employers. Your reasons for leaving academia should be presented in a convincing manner.

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Timing and strategic planning

By the middle of your PhD at the latest – or, for postdocs, at an appropriate stage early in the qualification phase – it is advisable to actively reflect on your own career goals. This is not about making a 'hasty' decision, but rather a conscious process of clarifying the following questions during the PhD phase and shaping one's professional profile accordingly:

- What skills do I possess – and how can these be applied within or outside academia?
- Which fields of work suit my interests and strengths? What specific experience should I seek to gain during my PhD or postdoc phase (e.g. further training, networking, practical collaborations, etc.)?

Career Service

The Career Service at Bielefeld University supports PhD students and postdocs with enquiries regarding career paths outside academia through workshops, individual counselling, information and networking opportunities, such as:

- Individual Career Programme for PhD students and postdocs (a condensed programme covering everything from identifying your career profile to applying for jobs) or individual thematic modules
- The 'Perspektive (Career Fair)' and 'Career Guidance Week', which offer the opportunity to network with employers and professionals and find out about potential career paths.

Recommended reading and resources for career guidance (selection in German):

- Müller, Mirjam. Karriere nach der Wissenschaft: alternative Berufswege für Promovierte. Campus Verlag, 2017.
- Müller, Mirjam; Grewe, Oliver. Wissenschaftsmanagement als Beruf: Strategien für den Einstieg. Campus Verlag, 2020.
- Miriam Müller, Promotion Postdoc Professur. Karriereplanung in der Wissenschaft. Campus Verlag, 2024
- Angenent, Holger; Willicks, Freya. How to WiMi. Der Ratgeber für wissenschaftliche Mitarbeitende an Hochschulen und Forschungseinrichtungen, transcript Verlag, 2024

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Tip: The ‘My Academic Profile’ worksheet for PhD students and postdocs enables you to take stock of the academic skills you have acquired so far. It can be used for personal reflection or, in addition, during a career development discussion with your supervisor or line manager, or during career counselling sessions with Career Service or GrACe.