



Minimum-length research contracts ‘don’t address systemic issues’

Germany’s plan to extend the length of academic contracts will do little to relieve precarity in researchers’ early careers, experts say

Published on August 12, 2026

Last updated August 12, 2026

Seher Asaf (/author/seher-asaf)

Twitter: @sehra852 (<https://twitter.com/sehra852>)

1

Germany’s plan to extend the minimum length of academic contracts for PhD students and postdoctoral researchers fails to address the underlying issues that lead to job insecurity, experts have said.

The German cabinet has approved a draft law that would give employed PhD researchers a first contract of at least three years and postdoctoral researchers a first contract of at least two years, as well as stronger protections for researchers taking parental leave or caring for relatives.



Source: Arno Burgi/DPA/AFP via Getty Images

Germany’s Federal Ministry for Research, Technology and Space said in a statement that the aim of the changes was to “provide greater security for scientists”. The move comes after years of criticism (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/germanys-short-term-fix-temporary-contracts-wearing>) of short-term contracts and a lack of long-term opportunities, which have kept

scholars on tempora



"It's not really a systemic change," said Frank Ziegele, executive director of the Center for Higher Education in Germany. "It just makes the conditions in the current system better."

ADVERTISEMENT

The attractiveness of academic careers (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ichbinhanna-german-researchers-snap-over-lack-permanent-jobs>) for younger researchers is a major issue, he said, adding that the debate over whether contracts should last two, three or six years overlooks these larger structural issues.

He said universities needed to invest more heavily in the professional development of researchers on temporary contracts and offer a range of secure roles outside the traditional route to professorship.

"Not all of these postdocs will become professors," he said. "The problem is not that the postdoc contract is limited. The problem is that there are not many positions at universities which are attractive outside the professorship."

He pointed to emerging roles in areas such as teaching and learning, research management and specialist research support as possible alternatives. "Some universities are now, for instance, starting to employ instructional designers, which focus on the didactics of online teaching," he said.

Ziegele also said the growth of third-party research funding at universities had led to an increase in temporary contracts. Universities may get funding for a project for only three years making it difficult for them to offer permanent employment to researchers whose salaries depend on those grants, he added.

Francesco Maurelli, co-chair of the Global Young Academy, a group based in Germany that represents early to mid-career scientists around the world, said requiring longer initial contracts would help researchers avoid situations in which they begin a doctorate but run out of funding before finishing it.

ADVERTISEMENT

“The reforms are partially significant but I don’t think they dramatically change much,” he said. “But the main issue in research is the instability in young researchers’ careers which continues late into their careers, and this structural instability isn’t addressed in this reform.”

He added that there is a structural problem in how research is organised, with one professor on top with a permanent position and many researchers below them chasing the next contract.

The proposed rules give researchers more certainty for two or three years but do little to improve their chances of finding a stable research career afterwards. “Unpredictability is also an aspect that leads to mobility,” he added.

“[The changes] address the initial step. You have a little bit of bread for two to three years but that doesn’t address what happens after, particularly the chances of getting a permanent position in research.”

seher.asaf@timeshighereducation.com (mailto:seher.asaf@timeshighereducation.com)

Read more about: [Research \(/news/research\)](/news/research)

[PhD, postgraduate and early career \(/policy/phd-postgraduate-and-early-career\)](/policy/phd-postgraduate-and-early-career)

[Science careers \(/policy/science-careers\)](/policy/science-careers)

[Students \(/news/students\)](/news/students)

[Graduate employment \(/policy/graduate-employment\)](/policy/graduate-employment)

RELATED ARTICLES



Germany's short-term fix on temporary contracts wearing off

[\(/news/germanys-short-term-fix-temporary-contracts-wearing\)](/news/germanys-short-term-fix-temporary-contracts-wearing)

By Ben Upton [\(/author/ben-upton\)](/author/ben-upton)
31 May



#IchbinHanna: German researchers snap over lack of permanent jobs

[\(/news/ichbinhanna-german-researchers-snap-over-lack-permanent-jobs\)](/news/ichbinhanna-german-researchers-snap-over-lack-permanent-jobs)

By David Matthews [\(/content/david-matthews-0\)](/content/david-matthews-0)
21 June



Germany's ageing post-war campuses face huge repair bill

[\(/news/germanys-ageing-post-war-campus-faces-huge-repair-bill\)](/news/germanys-ageing-post-war-campus-faces-huge-repair-bill)

By Seher Asaf [\(/author/seher-asaf\)](/author/seher-asaf) 5 June



German universities reluctant to join India campus boom

[\(/news/german-universities-reluctant-join-india-campus-boom\)](/news/german-universities-reluctant-join-india-campus-boom)

By Seher Asaf [\(/author/seher-asaf\)](/author/seher-asaf)
16 January

READER'S COMMENTS (1)

#1 Submitted by graff.... on August 12, 2026 - 12:55am

Any form of contract combats "precarity" concerns. There is no single solution

reply (/comment/reply/744410/78696)

HAVE YOUR SAY

Comment *

Please make sure that your comment does not contravene our Terms and Conditions (/terms-and-conditions/) or Website Terms of Use (/website-terms-of-use/).

When you submit a comment, your display name will be shown publicly. If you have not set a username, part of your email address may be displayed instead. You can set or update your username to in your account settings (<https://ums.timeshighereducation.com/user>).

Submit comment

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



Singapore graduate employment data not ‘the be-all and end-all’

(/news/singapore-graduate-employment-data-not-be-all-and-end-all)

By Rosalind Skillen (/author/rosalind-skillen)
12 August



Students crash grid by maxing out on ‘hour of power’ deals

(/news/students-crash-grid-maxing-out-hour-power-deals)

By John Ross (/author/john-ross)
11 August



‘Flawed’ use of non-significant data ‘killing further research’

(/news/flawed-use-non-significant-data-killing-further-research)

By Juliette Rowsell (/author/juliette-rowsell)
11 August



EU entry 'will not transform Montenegro's universities overnight'

(/news/eu-entry-will-not-transform-montenegros-universities-overnight)

By Seher Asaf (/author/seher-asaf)

10 August

SPONSORED

(/hub/hsbc/p/disrupting-higher-education-through-collaboration)

Disrupting higher education through collaboration (/hub/hsbc/p/disrupting-higher-education-through-collaboration)

The University of Sydney partnered with HSBC UK to help improve students' problem solving, teamwork and employability

**Promoted by HSBC
SPONSORED**

(/hub/p/jisc-futures-digital-revolution-and-future-science)

Jisc Futures: the digital revolution and the future of science (/hub/p/jisc-futures-digital-revolution-and-future-science)

The digital revolution and the future of science. Geoffrey Boulton writes the first in a series of articles from Jisc on research in the age of open...

**Promoted by Jisc
SPONSORED**

(/hub/huawei/p/digital-healthcare-requires-new-way-thinking-well-new-technologies)

Digital healthcare requires a new way of thinking, as well as new technologies (/hub/huawei/p/digital-healthcare-requires-new-way-thinking-well-new-technologies)

Decentralisation, data sharing and federated learning have the potential reduce the cost and improve the efficacy of delivering consultations and treatments

**Promoted by Huawei
SPONSORED**

FEATURED JOBS

Professor (W2) of Computational Literary Studies with a Focus on the Intersection of Research
(https://www.timeshighereducation.com/unijobs/listing/413990/professor-w2-of-computational-literary-studies-with-a-focus-on-the-intersection-of-research/?trackid=10&utm_source=the-jobs-service&utm_campaign=ad_l&utm_score=14)
UNIVERSITY OF TUBINGEN

Chair Professor and Dean, Wu Jieh Yee School of Interdisciplinary Studies
(https://www.timeshighereducation.com/unijobs/listing/413869/chair-professor-and-dean-wu-jieh-yee-school-of-interdisciplinary-studies/?trackid=10&utm_source=the-jobs-service&utm_campaign=ad_jt&utm_score=14)
LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

Post-Doctoral Associate in the Division of Social Science - Drs. Minsu Park
(https://www.timeshighereducation.com/unijobs/listing/414462/post-doctoral-associate-in-the-division-of-social-science-drs-minsu-park/?trackid=10&utm_source=the-jobs-service&utm_campaign=ad&utm_score=10)
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY ABU DHABI

Assistant/Associate /Full Professor in E-Commerce, School of Economics and Management
(https://www.timeshighereducation.com/unijobs/listing/414443/assistant-associate-full-professor-in-e-commerce-school-of-economics-and-management/?trackid=10#apply-form&utm_source=the-jobs-service&utm_campaign=ad&utm_score=10)
XIAMEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

Postdoctoral Fellow, Division of Industrial Data Science
(https://www.timeshighereducation.com/unijobs/listing/414374/postdoctoral-fellow-division-of-industrial-data-science/?trackid=10&utm_source=the-jobs-service&utm_campaign=ad&utm_score=10)
LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

See all jobs (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/unijobs/listings/>)

Update job preferences (https://ums.timeshighereducation.com/user/professional_details?silentAuth=true&redirect_uri=https%3A/www.timeshighereducation.com)

(/hub/western-union-business-solutions/p/universities-international-student-recruitment-strategies)

Universities' international student recruitment strategies must adapt (/hub/western-union-business-solutions/p/universities-international-student-recruitment-strategies)

China's Belt and Road initiative is one factor Asia becoming more competitive and attracting more international students

Promoted by Western Union Business Solutions

SPONSORED

ADVERTISEMENT

[FAQs \(/faqs/general-faqs\)](/faqs/general-faqs)

[Contact us \(/contact-us\)](/contact-us)

[About us \(/about-us\)](/about-us)

[Work for THE \(https://careers.timeshighereducation.com/\)](https://careers.timeshighereducation.com/)

[Privacy \(/privacy-policy\)](/privacy-policy)

[Cookie policy \(/cookie-policy\)](/cookie-policy)

[Accessibility statement \(/content/online-accessibility-statement\)](/content/online-accessibility-statement)

[THE Connect \(/our-partners\)](/our-partners)

[Media Centre \(/media-centre\)](/media-centre)

[Modern slavery statement \(/about-us/modern-slavery-act-2015\)](/about-us/modern-slavery-act-2015)

[University Directory \(https://www.timeshighereducation.com/university-directory/a\)](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/university-directory/a)

Copyright © 2026 THE - Times Higher Education

Subscribe to Times Higher Education

As the voice of global higher education, THE is an invaluable daily resource. Subscribe today to receive unlimited news and analyses, commentary from the sharpest minds in international academia, our influential university rankings analysis and the latest insights from our World Summit series.

[Find out more \(/store\)](/store)