

Charter of the postdoctoral researcher and the senior academic host @ KU Leuven

PREAMBLE

KU Leuven has a vibrant and diverse community of postdoctoral researchers eager to let their passions and ambitions flourish in a stimulating climate of scientific curiosity, personal growth and collective engagement. Together with other key figures in the academic ecosystem, postdoctoral researchers help bridge the gap between emerging and established researchers, and make indispensable contributions to our institution. In this way, they help ensure both continuity and innovation, both of which are crucial to sustainable research. As researchers following the latest developments in science, they represent KU Leuven in the international research community and thereby maintain and strengthen KU Leuven's position in the global network of knowledge. Drawing on their expertise, postdoctoral researchers also contribute to the social and cultural debate and the development of the knowledge society.

Depending on the contractual provisions, the postdoctoral fellowship may have different objectives, referred to below as the postdoctoral assignment, such as conducting own research, managing research projects, valorising research findings or taking on teaching commitments. KU Leuven acknowledges this essential role and embraces the rich diversity within the postdoctoral community. However, the broad range of tasks, coupled with uncertainties in terms of contract duration, career progression and employment conditions, mean that the postdoctoral period can also be perceived as challenging. KU Leuven is acutely aware of this.

The postdoctoral appointment fulfils a bridging function in the careers of postdoctoral researchers. The roles and responsibilities of postdoctoral researchers are largely driven by their individual goals and ambitions, the research environment in which they are active, the source of funding and objectives of the postdoctoral assignment, the work environment and their life plans, which may change over time. Some will secure permanent appointments within academia, but the vast majority will progress to positions outside academia, where their skills and expertise can further enrich the professional field. With a view to these diverse career paths, KU Leuven wants to provide its postdoctoral researchers with as much support as possible in developing their skills according to their ambitions.

OBJECTIVE

This charter is a **guideline** for the postdoctoral researcher¹ and the senior academic host² **to discuss the mutual expectations and responsibilities and to make the necessary arrangements for optimal cooperation and further development.**

As a guideline, this charter creates a framework within which the necessary arrangements can be made for each individual postdoctoral researcher, with sufficient consideration for the broad diversity within the postdoctoral community. At the latest **three months after the start** of the postdoctoral appointment, a copy of the charter, signed by the postdoctoral researcher and the senior academic host, has to be submitted to the designated personnel officer of the faculty (the Humanities and Social Sciences group) or of the department (the Biomedical Sciences group and Sciences & Technology group) where the postdoctoral researcher is appointed. If during the postdoctoral appointment another member of the senior academic staff takes on the role of senior academic host, the same copy of the charter is also signed by the new senior academic host.

The [internal regulations for the relevant staff category, KU Leuven's other internal regulations](#) as well as the regulations and contractual obligations imposed by the funding of the postdoctoral fellowship and/or any cooperation agreements apply and prevail over the guidelines outlined in the present charter.

ROLES OF THE POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHERS, SENIOR ACADEMIC HOSTS AND KU LEUVEN

The importance of proper guidance and support for a fruitful postdoctoral period of research and training cannot be overestimated. Supporting postdoctoral researchers in developing and shaping their careers within the timeframe and according to the objectives of their postdoctoral appointment and with a view to their subsequent careers within or outside academia requires dedicated collegial cooperation between postdoctoral researchers and their senior academic hosts. This entails responsibilities for both parties and for KU Leuven as an institution.

The following sections focus on the roles, rights and responsibilities of postdoctoral researchers, senior academic hosts and KU Leuven, each time highlighting (i) research, (ii) teaching activities, and (iii) personal and professional development.

¹ A postdoctoral researcher is a PhD holder with a temporary academic appointment in one of the following staff statuses: doctoral assistants within the AAP, research associates and postdoctoral scholarship holders within the BAP and postdoctoral fellowship holders of Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) or similar international organisations.

² The senior academic host is a member of the senior academic staff (ZAP) who is responsible for the postdoctoral researcher's appointment. This may be the principal investigator in the research group, the head of the research group, or another ZAP member formally responsible for the postdoctoral researcher.

Role of the postdoctoral researcher

Throughout their postdoctoral period, the postdoctoral researcher is expected to actively manage their career with a view to progressively developing their profile as an independent researcher. Setting up research, sharing expertise with students and colleagues and strengthening the necessary skills is therefore primarily the responsibility of the postdoctoral researchers, next to accomplishing the specific objectives of their postdoctoral assignment.

Postdoctoral researchers are also expected to take responsibility for cultivating their talents and developing their career, within or outside academia. Postdoctoral researchers cooperate to ensure a positive culture of working, learning and living together. They contribute to an environment in which everyone can feel welcome, can recognize and appreciate each other's differences, can think, speak and participate openly, and respects each other's boundaries.

Research

During their PhD, postdoctoral researchers have already acquired the qualities needed to develop into independent researchers and they bring these qualities to bear in research and/or valorisation activities that show a considerable degree of autonomy. Postdoctoral researchers are **proactive** and make the necessary efforts to ensure **good progress** and that the objectives of their postdoctoral assignment are accomplished. The active contribution made by postdoctoral researchers in the planning of the research and in analysing and interpreting the results testifies to their qualification as **independent researchers** who can design, develop, implement and adapt an extensive research process, or valorise or coordinate a large-scale research project.

In carrying out their research, postdoctoral researchers can rely on close collaboration with and support from the senior academic host and other members of staff at KU Leuven. In the context of their postdoctoral assignment, postdoctoral researchers are encouraged to develop their **(inter)national profile** as much as possible (e.g. by research stays abroad, by participation in international projects coordinated elsewhere, by taking up active responsibilities in (inter)national research networks, etc.). and to invite their international contacts to engage with the KU Leuven research community.

Postdoctoral researchers ensure, in consultation with the senior academic host, that their research results in **publications and/or other realisations**, taking into account the prevailing practices within the field, and taking into account [KU Leuven good practices on publication and authorship](#). Postdoctoral researchers are aware of and respect KU Leuven's policy on [open access](#) and [intellectual property rights regarding research results](#), and adhere to the principles of correct **data management** according to the standard methods used in the research group and KU Leuven's policy on [research data management](#).

Postdoctoral researchers are encouraged to draft, finalise and submit **applications for funding** for their appointment and research activities, and are given due recognition for their contributions, e.g. as **co-supervisors for (doctoral) research** in the research group that results from these applications.

Postdoctoral researchers are aware of and adhere to the generally accepted norms of **fair, honest and ethical scientific conduct** (see [KU Leuven checklist on research integrity](#) and the [regulations concerning integrity and ethics](#)).

Postdoctoral researchers **integrate and commit themselves** to the best of their abilities in the research group and abide by the internal agreements.

Teaching

Postdoctoral researchers are encouraged to participate in **teaching activities**, such as teaching bachelor's and master's students, supervising tutorials, lab or practice sessions, correcting assignments and exams, assuming the role of (co-)supervisor of bachelor's and master's theses and co-supervisor for (doctoral) research. This takes into account the postdoctoral assignment, the internal regulations and contractual obligations and possibilities, the research field and the work environment, and the personal objectives and ambitions of the postdoctoral researcher. Clear agreements are made regarding the degree of independence with which these teaching activities are carried out, and who the point of contact is (this may or may not be the senior academic host) who bears final responsibility in this regard.

Postdoctoral researchers taking up a teaching commitment make the necessary efforts to provide high quality education and to create an [optimal teaching-learning environment](#) in line with [KU Leuven's vision on education and learning](#). They do this in close collaboration with the teaching staff member and/or the teaching team responsible for the relevant teaching activities, and in doing so comply with the agreement frameworks that provide guidance or are legally binding, such as the [teaching and examination regulations](#), the [privacy statement](#), the [profile of a good doctoral \(co-\)supervisor](#) and [master's thesis supervisor](#), and [copyright in the development of teaching materials](#).

Personal and professional development

During their appointment, postdoctoral researchers are encouraged to actively reflect on their future, in order to secure a timely transition towards a sustainable career and to acquire skills conducive to employment in a wide array of sectors. Postdoctoral researchers and their senior academic hosts have **regular (at least annual) discussions about their activities and further career development**. This discussion covers the current activities within the postdoctoral assignment, the future (career) prospects, the personal and professional objectives of the postdoctoral researcher and which competences need to be developed further to contribute to the further professional career within or outside academia. The discussion results in **concrete agreements** that are followed up and updated each year, and which may be reflected in an **individual development plan**. The faculties and departments are at liberty to conceive the individual development plan according to their own regulations. As a possible framework, the HR department has developed the 'Individual Development Plan Plus' (IDP+) in close cooperation with the doctoral schools.

Postdoctoral researchers are encouraged to actively participate in the representation of their community in university policy-making bodies.

Postdoctoral researchers are encouraged to think about and take care of their **well-being**, including striving for a healthy work-life balance and contributing to a positive working climate.

Postdoctoral researchers inform themselves about [remuneration, benefits](#) (e.g. insurance, holidays, pension, etc.) and the [internal regulations for their staff category](#).

Role of the senior academic host

The senior academic host welcomes the postdoctoral researcher in a stimulating social and intellectual climate and supports them in developing and carrying out their postdoctoral assignment as a valued member of the academic community. The supervisor plays an encouraging, coordinating and monitoring role for the entire duration of the postdoctoral appointment and co-creates an environment that is conducive to professional development and mental and physical well-being. The supervisor fosters a culture of inclusion and respect and takes on an exemplary role to this end. He or she is aware of their (own) position of power and the wider [policy on preventing and dealing with transgressive behaviour](#). In addition, the senior academic host ensures that during their appointment and in the context of the postdoctoral assignment, the postdoctoral researcher can also further acquire other essential skills that will enable them to move on to further employment, within or outside academia, after the completion of the postdoctoral appointment. The senior academic host further ensures that the postdoctoral researcher is provided with a suitable workspace.

Research

A good senior academic host has the qualities necessary to ensure the correct context and support for the postdoctoral researcher they host. The senior academic host is an **experienced researcher** and has built up a **solid reputation and network** in a **research area** that is sufficiently related to the area in which the postdoctoral researcher is carrying out their research, enabling them to provide the necessary guidance and support.

Regular **formal and informal contact meetings** between the postdoctoral researcher, the senior academic host and/or other members of staff of KU Leuven are essential for good collaboration and support.

The senior academic host gives the postdoctoral researcher space for the independent exploration of their own research ideas within the framework of the postdoctoral assignment. Since postdoctoral researchers are expected to develop an independent research profile, the senior academic host must be ready to support the postdoctoral researcher in reaching out to other researchers in case the research develops in directions the senior academic host is less familiar with.

For postdoctoral researchers with academic ambitions, it is crucial to demonstrate their independence, by acquiring a substantial independent research project and/or by publishing at least one major manuscript as first or last author without the co-authorship of the supervisor of their doctoral research. If the senior academic host was also the supervisor of the doctoral research, they advise the postdoctoral researcher to explore the possibilities of an independent publication, within the rules of authorship.

The senior academic host creates a research environment in which **fair, honest and ethical scientific conduct** (e.g. [good data management](#), [authorship](#), avoiding conflicts of interest) are the norm (see [KU Leuven checklist on research integrity](#)). In addition, the senior academic host provides clarity concerning the nature of dishonest conduct within the context of the discipline.

Teaching

Developing teaching expertise can add value in many professional settings, both within and outside of academia. Within the contractual possibilities of the postdoctoral assignment, the senior academic host is therefore encouraged to **stimulate the building up of educational expertise and the participation in teaching activities** (as mentioned above) by the postdoctoral researcher. At all times, the right balance must be struck between the time investment of the postdoctoral researcher in their development as an independent professional, the postdoctoral assignment and possible teaching activities.

If the senior academic host is not the person responsible for the teaching activities of the postdoctoral researcher, they will refer the latter to a colleague or team who can take on this role. These points of contact are **experienced teachers** within KU Leuven. They are **familiar with the course(s)** within which the postdoctoral researchers perform their teaching activities, so they can offer them the necessary guidance and support. They guide them in the organisation of teaching and assessment activities and the applicable agreement frameworks. They provide opportunities for postdoctoral researchers to observe teaching activities and coach them in performing their own teaching activities. They discuss the [vision on education and learning](#) with them and also include them in the [quality assurance and quality culture around education](#).

Personal and professional development

The senior academic host is jointly responsible for creating a **positive and stimulating professional work environment** and for integrating postdoctoral researchers in the research group (and the wider educational community). This includes taking into account any personal matters that may have an impact on the research and teaching activities and facilitating a healthy balance between professional and private life.

As a team leader, the senior academic host ensures that postdoctoral researchers are followed up and coached as a member of the team. This includes **regular (at least annual) discussions focused on the functioning and further career development**, with an eye on the past and the present and a focus on the future, attuned to the specific skills of the postdoctoral researcher and their academic or non-academic career prospects and preferences. On these occasions, the individual arrangements and/or the individual development plan of the postdoctoral researcher are updated, and relevant career networks are discussed, along with career development initiatives developed by the departments involved, including the [YouReCa Career Center](#) and the doctoral schools.

Since appointments as a postdoctoral researcher are, by definition, temporary, the senior academic host needs to be aware of the [internal regulations per staff category](#), such as

restrictions on (consecutive) temporary appointments, and must actively avoid infringements of this and discuss them in good time with the postdoctoral researcher.

Role of KU Leuven

KU Leuven creates a framework in which postdoctoral appointments can be taken up under optimal conditions and both monitors and regularly updates this framework. It is determined to serve its entire postdoctoral community in line with its [diversity policy](#). The university strives to break down structural barriers in its learning and work organisation, to create a working environment in which every member of staff can flourish, feel supported and ask for support. It supports its staff in their well-being, managing their career and work-life balance. It fosters a cohesive and vibrant postdoctoral community by creating regular opportunities for postdoctoral networking.

KU Leuven offers its staff members a [wide range of training courses and workshops](#), including a range of initiatives specifically tailored to the needs of postdoctoral researchers. It also encourages each individual to take their own initiatives for further professional development. It supports both the postdoctoral researchers and the senior academic hosts in [developing their leadership qualities](#). In line with KU Leuven's representative governance policy, its junior researchers are properly represented in the university's various councils and committees.

In order to ensure that all members of the postdoctoral community can get the most out of their appointment, and to assist the senior academic hosts in successfully fulfilling their role, KU Leuven puts in place the necessary support to foster a stimulating working environment in terms of research, teaching activities and personal and professional development. Various **entities** develop an offering based on their own specific role or expertise and/or join forces to develop an integrated programme or offering.

- The deans and vice-deans for Research of the faculties or the chairs of the departments ensure that this charter is signed by the postdoctoral researcher and the senior academic host, and that the annual discussions on the researcher's performance and their further career development take place. The faculties and departments are free to organise these discussions according to their own regulations.
- The doctoral schools of the [Humanities and Social Sciences](#) group, the [Biomedical Sciences](#) group and the [Science, Engineering and Technology](#) group support postdoctoral researchers in accordance with their policies for supporting the careers of junior researchers, and inform them about relevant initiatives.
- The [Research Coordination Office](#), together with other offices and services where relevant, provides advice on research issues (such as [research integrity](#), [open science](#), [open access](#) and [research data management](#)) and offers support with applications for research funding.
- [Leuven Research and Development](#) provides advice and assistance on all issues related to knowledge and technology transfer, and [intellectual property rights](#).
- The [Education Policy Units](#) and [KU Leuven Learning Lab](#) provide advice, support and professionalisation on a wide range of educational issues, and supervise innovative educational projects.

- The [HR department](#) supports staff members in their well-being, managing their career and achieving a [work-life balance](#). It informs staff about their [remuneration and benefits](#) (e.g. insurance, holidays, pension, etc.) and provides [support with HR-related questions](#).
- The [YouReCa Career Center](#) provides support in exploring career questions and future career prospects, and facilitates the transition into the non-academic labour market.

As an organisation, KU Leuven strives to treat its staff with care. Postdoctoral researchers, senior academic hosts and KU Leuven itself are all responsible for resolving any **problems and challenges** that may arise during the postdoctoral researcher's career trajectory. For problems and questions that do not immediately find a solution in their own context, the [unit of confidence](#) may offer a solution. KU Leuven commits itself to an adequate follow-up. Signing this charter lays the foundation for a good collaboration.

The charter of the postdoctoral researcher and the senior academic host was approved by the Academic Council on September 14, 2021.

The postdoctoral researcher and the senior academic host confirm that they discussed the mutual expectations and responsibilities and made the necessary arrangements for optimal cooperation and further development.

Postdoctoral researcher
(name, date, signature)

Senior academic host
(name, date, signature)