

# The Employment Situation of the *Mittelbau* at Austrian Universities

Results of the Survey

– Report –

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In cooperation with  
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## Executive Summary

This report examines the employment conditions of academic staff (*Mittelbau*) at Austrian public universities, based on survey data from more than 2,300 respondents collected in 2023. The findings highlight the systemic nature of precarious employment and its detrimental impacts on academic careers, research, and teaching.

### Key Findings:

- **Perceived Level of Information and Affectedness:** A large number of respondents feel inadequately informed about the legal framework, with limited awareness of its implications. Most anticipate being personally affected by precarious employment in the near future, while a large majority observe that colleagues are already impacted, often experiencing job insecurity and involuntary contract terminations.
- **Impact on Teaching and Research:** Teaching suffers in diversity, integration with research, and student support due to the lack of secure working conditions. Respondents report that research and teaching continuity is compromised. Employment constraints prevent some staff from submitting grant proposals and funding gaps are a significant concern.
- **Prospects to Achieve Permanency and Career Goals:** Permanent roles are limited, with few fixed-term employees having a clear pathway to stability. Respondents show a strong preference for permanent academic careers, particularly in roles such as Senior Scientists or Senior Lecturers.

### Recommendations:

- **Support Individual Resilience While Addressing Systemic Issues:** As already implemented by many institutions, immediate relief can be provided through career coaching and legal awareness programs to help academics cope with precarity. However, these initiatives must be paired with systemic reforms to reduce the widespread reliance on fixed-term contracts that jeopardizes research and teaching quality according to the majority of our respondents.
- **Develop Comprehensive Staffing Plans and Flexible Career Models:** Create staffing plans (*Stellenpläne*) with clear permanency targets for roles across all academic levels. Additionally, the introduction of diverse career pathways supports both vertical progression and further development in a horizontal direction. These paths should take into account gender and family planning considerations to retain bright minds in higher education. The transparency created by these staffing plans and career models also increase motivation and future planning especially for underrepresented groups like women, first-generation scholars, and non-Austrians.
- **Stabilize Project-Based Employment:** Implement mechanisms like a backpack ("Rucksack") system to pool surplus resources from third-party-funded projects, providing interim budgets during funding gaps. Allocate budget reserves to ensure job continuity for project-funded staff, reducing their vulnerability to unpredictable funding cycles.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the growing prevalence of precarious employment in the academic workforce has garnered significant attention, as its harmful effects on academics, institutions, and the broader public mission of higher education have become increasingly evident. Precarious employment refers to work characterized by economic insecurity, such as low pay, lack of benefits, involuntary part-time work, and especially involuntary temporary or fixed-term contracts (Tompá et al., 2007). While such conditions have long since existed to some degree within academia, they are now becoming the dominant form of employment across many higher education systems globally.

Academics facing precarious employment frequently report feeling overwhelmed, vulnerable, exploited, and plagued by stress, anxiety, and exhaustion due to the uncertainty of their future employment, the relentless pressure to secure external funding, and the continuous need to apply for new positions (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). The precarious nature of these roles often leaves academics anxious about when and where their next job will be, complicating both personal and professional planning. Beyond the immediate harm to individuals, this instability also negatively impacts the quality of research and teaching by disrupting continuity, hindering long-term academic projects, and resulting in a constant loss of expertise and experience. This now widespread practice has far-reaching consequences for innovation and the economic potential of advanced economies, ultimately undermining the global competitiveness of nations that rely on a stable academic research sector to drive scientific and technological progress (OECD, 2021; Council of the European Union, 2023).

In response to this trend, the present study aims to provide an overview of the academic working conditions in Austria. Despite recent reforms intended to mitigate precarious working conditions, fixed-term contracts have increasingly taken hold within the Austrian academic sector. This growing reliance on fixed-term employment remains a significant issue, as it continues to affect the well-being of academic staff and undermines the public mission of universities in the domain of research and education.

Against this background, this report presents key findings from the survey "On the Employment Situation of the *Mittelbau* at Austrian Universities," conducted by the Netzwerk Unterbau Wissenschaft (NUWiss)<sup>1</sup>. The aim of this survey was to analyze the employment conditions of academic staff across Austria's public higher education institutions, particularly focusing on the increasing use of fixed-term contracts. Building on a prior study conducted at the University of Vienna (Partheymüller & Dannecker, 2024) with a sample of approximately 1,100 scientists, this new study expands the analysis to include a wider range of Austrian universities. Conducted between March and November 2023, a new survey gathered data from over 2,300 additional academic staff members, providing deeper insights into the impact of precarious working conditions on teaching, research, and the personal well-being of academics across Austria.

The results of the survey emphasize how the precarious employment conditions create systemic challenges within the academic workforce, contributing to job insecurity and disruption in research and teaching. By drawing on data from multiple institutions across Austria, this survey offers a compre-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nuwiss.at/>

hensive foundation for discussions on how to address the structural obstacles and create more sustainable working conditions that facilitate high-quality research and education in the Austrian academic sector.

## 2 Background

The increasing prevalence of precarious employment in higher education has not only become a topic of public debate but also a growing focus of scientific research. Accumulating evidence indicates that the now commonplace precarious working conditions are detrimental to both the well-being of academics and the quality of academic work, particularly in research and teaching. Previous research has highlighted multiple dimensions of this issue, including the structural causes of precarity, the coping strategies adopted by affected academics, the gendered aspects of precarious employment, and its impact on both individuals and institutions (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Structurally, the corporatisation and marketisation of higher education are frequently cited as major drivers of precarity. Universities increasingly rely on precarious labor to reduce costs, maintain budgetary flexibility, and avoid the expenses associated with permanent contracts. In terms of coping strategies, scholars have identified a prevalent attitude of "cruel optimism", where academics cling to the hope of eventually securing permanent positions, which in turn perpetuates their exploitation within the system (Bone, 2021). Research on these conditions also underscores the gendered nature of academic precarity, with women disproportionately occupying precarious roles compared to their male counterparts (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). These structures not only place women at a disadvantage in the competitive race for the few available permanent positions but also amplify existing gender inequities within academia. In addition, the mental health toll of precarious employment is well documented, as seen in Nature's worldwide surveys of PhDs and postdocs, where a significant number of early-career researchers report stress, anxiety, and depression linked to job insecurity (Woolston, 2019; 2020). A recent Swedish study further corroborates these findings, showing a marked increase in the use of psychiatric medications among PhD students during their doctoral studies, illustrating the profound mental health impacts of academic precarity (Bergvall et al., 2024). Beyond the individual impacts, the detrimental effects on universities and their ability to fulfill their public missions in research and teaching are becoming increasingly evident (Partheymüller & Dannecker, 2024). The lack of job continuity hampers long-term research projects, weakens institutional research capacity, and puts at risk the breadth and quality of teaching, ultimately jeopardizing the core missions of higher education institutions.

While these general trends require attention, the specific conditions of national higher education systems play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of precarious academic workers and – most importantly – finding sustainable solutions to improve scientific work. While much of the discourse has focused on the Anglosphere, German-speaking countries face unique challenges tied to particular regulatory frameworks. Germany and Austria, for instance, stand out by their reliance on fixed-term employment in academia (Kreckel, 2016) and have attempted to address academic precarity by introducing legal limits on the duration of fixed-term contracts (e.g., Germany's *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz*, allowing 6 years of PhD and 6 years of postdoc employment, and Austria's §109 *Universitätsgesetz*, limiting contracts to 8 years, with the possibility of a 4-year extension for PhD positions).

Although these regulations aim to reduce precarious employment, they have not yet led to a structural shift toward more permanent positions. Instead, universities often offer no further contracts when the maximum allowed duration is reached, even when funding is available, leaving academics without job security or career prospects. The share of employees on fixed-term contracts amounts to about 90 percent in Germany and approximately 80 percent in Austria (BMBWF, 2024). This unsatisfactory situation has sparked widespread protests (Bahr et al., 2022) and the formation of advocacy groups like the *Netzwerk Gute Arbeit in der Wissenschaft* (NGAWiss) in Germany (Gallas, 2018) and the *Netzwerk Unterbau Wissenschaft* (NUWiss) in Austria (Breth et al., 2022). These groups aim to address the systemic issues of precarious employment in academia and advocate for better working conditions, job security, and sustainable academic careers.

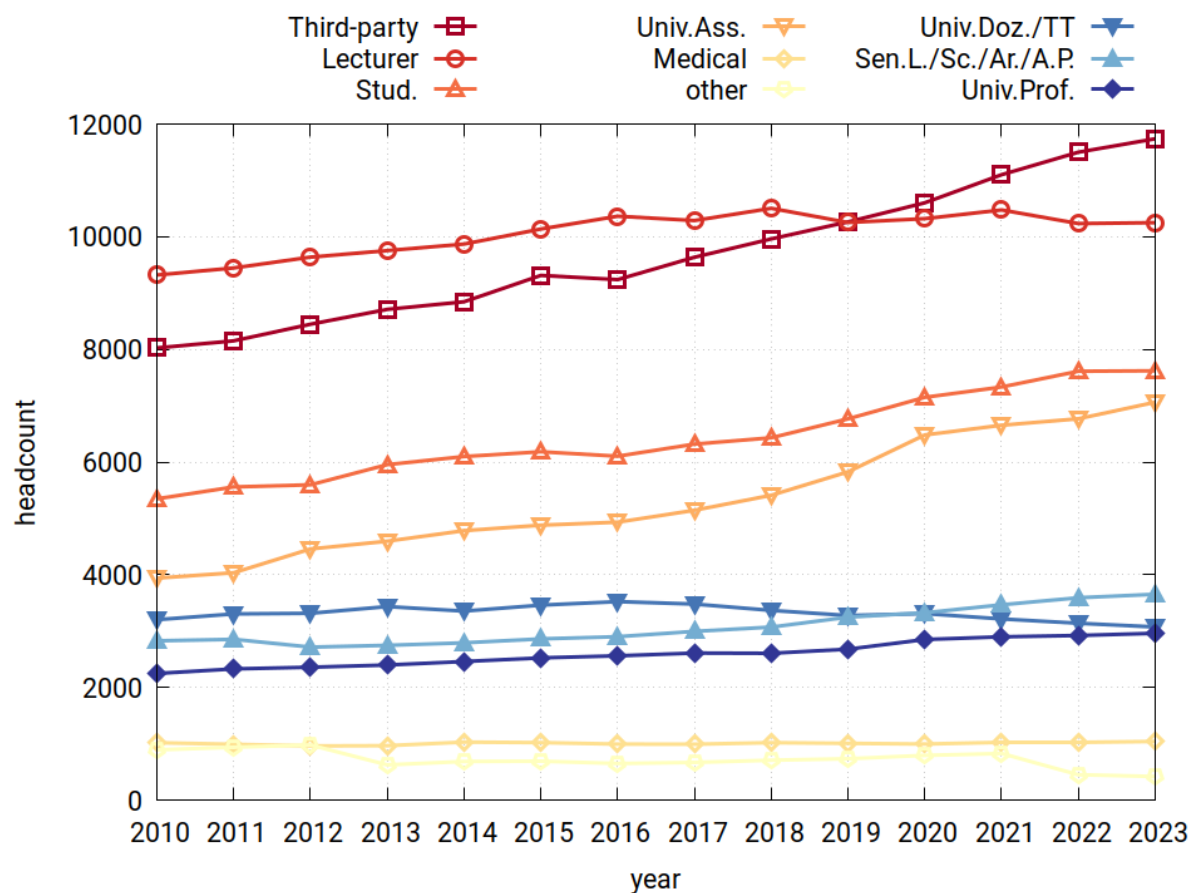


Figure 1: Scientific and artistic personnel at public Austrian Universities in the last 14 years

Note: Open symbols, colored red to yellow: predominantly fixed-term, including third-party funded (Third-party; (24),(25)<sup>2</sup>), lecturers (Lecturer; (17),(18)), student assistants (Stud.;(30)), university assistants (Univ. Ass.;(27)), medical speciality training (Medical;(23)) and other (21). Closed symbols, colored blue: predominantly permanent or with prospect of permanency, including university professors (Univ. Prof.; (11),(12),(81),(85),(86)), university lecturers (Univ. Doz.;(14)) and tenure track and associate professors (TT;(28),(88),(83),(82),(87)), senior lecturers/scientists/artists and former assistant profs. (Sen. Lec./Sc./Ar./A. P.; (84),(26),(16)) (Data source: unidata.gv.at).

Figure 1 shows the headcount of the scientific and artistic personnel at public Austrian universities in the last 14 years. In 2023, approximately 9,000 scientists and artists worked in academic positions that

<sup>2</sup> Codes refer to employment types as listed in 3.6 Appendix 9 of "[Universitäts- und Hochschulstatistik- und Bildungsdokumentationsverordnung](#)" (version dated April 12 2023).

were predominantly permanent or had a prospect of permanency. In contrast, roughly 37,000 scientists worked on the basis of fixed-term contracts. Over time, there has been a significant increase, in particular, in third-party-funded positions, student assistants, and university assistants, which are predominantly fixed-term roles. While roles such as Senior Scientists and Senior Lecturers have also increased over time (Baierl & Wurm, 2024), the decline in former types of permanent positions (tenured civil servants) has created counterbalancing trends among the predominantly permanent types of employment.

A previous study at the University of Vienna examined the employment conditions of academic staff in light of the 2021 amendment to Austria’s *Universitätsgesetz (UG 2002)*, which revised the regulations for fixed-term contracts under §109 UG (for further details on the legal background, see Partheymüller & Dannecker, 2024). The study, conducted between December 2022 and January 2023, surveyed over 1,100 academic staff members—representing 16 percent of the university’s *Mittelbau*—and found widespread issues, including limited awareness of the new regulations, pervasive job insecurity, and significant negative impacts on the personal lives and institution. The findings highlighted the pressing need for systemic reforms to address the issues faced by academic staff. However, this study had a crucial limitation: The data were gathered only at one, albeit Austria’s largest, public university.

With the current Austrian-wide study, we pursue the following goals: broadening the scope by covering additional universities and exploring specific themes in greater depth. In particular, we shed further light on the working conditions in third-party funded projects and investigate the preferred career models among academic staff as a way to move the discussion towards tangible solutions. By expanding the survey to multiple institutions, we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of employment conditions across the Austrian academic landscape and examine the critical areas that impact the *Mittelbau*’s professional trajectory and job security.

### 3 Data and Methods

#### 3.1 The Survey ‘On the Employment Situation of the *Mittelbau* at Austrian Universities’

The survey “On the Employment Situation of the *Mittelbau* at Austrian Universities” was conducted as an online survey. The questionnaire, which can be found in the online appendix<sup>3</sup>, included questions previously used in the study at the University of Vienna (Partheymüller & Dannecker, 2024), allowing for direct comparison with the existing results from that institution. The survey was programmed using Qualtrics and distributed through snowball sampling. Invitations were sent via email to relevant networks and multipliers, such as members of the NUWiss network and works councils across all public Austrian universities. Given that the University of Vienna had recently been surveyed, minimal recruitment efforts were directed towards this particular university. The survey was conducted from March 8, 2023, to November 20, 2023, with 90 percent of responses collected by April 26, 2023. Participants could complete the survey in either English or German.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://osf.io/7upx8/>

The questionnaire had several thematic sections. The first part gathered basic employment information, followed by questions about the personal impact of §109 UG and its effects on teaching and research activities. A dedicated module for project assistants addressed specific aspects of employment in third-party-funded projects. Subsequent sections explored respondents' views on desired career models and improvements in working conditions. While the questionnaire primarily consisted of closed-ended questions, it also included two open-ended questions: “How does the chain contract regulation affect you or your colleagues?” and “How could the employment situation be improved?” For this report, we present the results of both questions as word clouds alongside a more detailed analysis. However, only the responses to the first question were thoroughly analyzed, keeping the focus on the current situation of employees in Austria.

A total of 2,372 individuals participated in the study after excluding speeders and incomplete responses. The estimated target population, excluding the University of Vienna, was approximately 30,000, yielding a minimum response rate of about 8 percent. This response rate is in line with expectations for an online survey, especially considering the limitations of the snowball sampling method, such as potential non-contact issues.

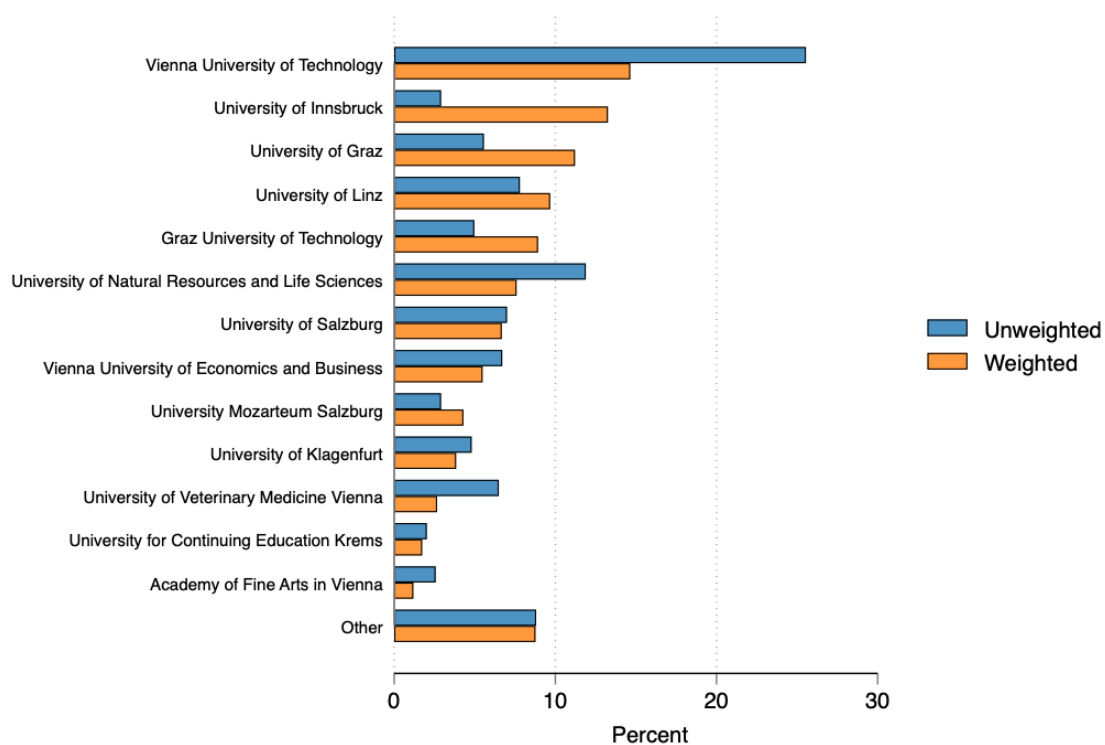


Figure 2: Share of Respondents by University

Participation levels varied across universities (see Figure 2). To address this, survey weights were calculated to adjust the observed frequencies according to the actual number of *Mittelbau* staff in 2023 at universities where a sufficient number of responses were obtained. Universities with relatively few responses were combined into a residual category labelled “Other,” which also includes responses from the University of Vienna (not a primary target). This category notably comprises responses from the University of Vienna (83), the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (42), and the University



of Leoben Mining and Metallurgy (20), as well as a small number of responses from the medical universities in Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck, and various universities of the arts and music. The respondents in the “Other” category were included in the analysis with a neutral weight of 1. All subsequent analyses are based on the weighted sample.

### 3.2 Demographic Profile of the Sample

The sociodemographic profile of the study sample, as shown by the bar graphs in Figure 3, reveals the following characteristics: In terms of gender, the sample is relatively balanced, with 48 percent identifying as female, 46 percent as male, and 6 percent as diverse or not providing an answer. The age distribution indicates a concentration of participants between the ages of 25 and 44, with the highest representation in the 30-34 (21 percent) and 35-39 (20 percent) age groups. Regarding education, the majority of participants hold a Doctorate (43 percent) or a Master’s degree (37 percent), while smaller proportions possess a *Matura*<sup>4</sup> or Bachelor’s degree (4 percent) or a *Habilitation*<sup>5</sup> (12 percent) degree. Additionally, 29 percent of participants have childcare responsibilities, 8 percent care for other family members, and 49 percent report no care duties.

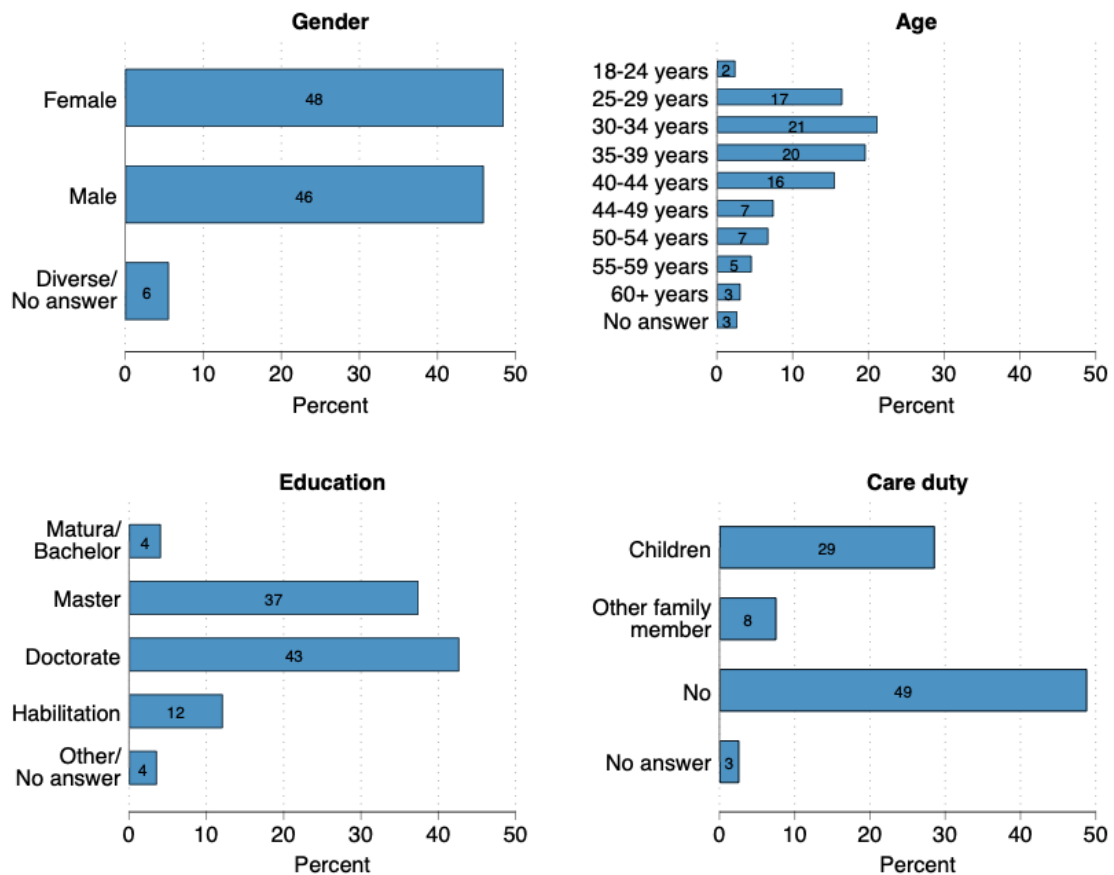


Figure 3: Demographic Profile

<sup>4</sup> Corresponds to the secondary school leaving examination, typically required for university admission in many European countries

<sup>5</sup> A postdoctoral qualification granting the *venia docendi*, the authorization to teach and conduct research independently at the university level.

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of academic positions held by respondents, highlighting the dominance of temporary roles. The largest shares are University assistant *prae docs* (19 percent) and Project assistant *prae docs* (15 percent). Other significant temporary positions include University assistant *post docs* (13 percent), Project assistant *post docs* (10 percent), and Lecturers (8 percent). Among permanent positions, Senior Scientist/Artist is the largest group, also at 8 percent. Lower percentages are observed for permanent roles such as Assistant/Associate Professors (5 percent), Senior Lecturers (5 percent), and Tenure-Track Professors (4 percent). Student assistants (3 percent) and Tutors (1 percent) make up a smaller share of the sample, which may be explained by the fact that many might not identify as part of the *Mittelbau* academic staff. Temporary Senior Lecturers (2 percent) and permanent Lecturers (1 percent) are also a minor fraction of the positions. The "Other" category (6 percent) encompasses a diverse range of staff, including administrative personnel, individuals funded by stipends, and some permanent university assistants (approx. 1 percent).

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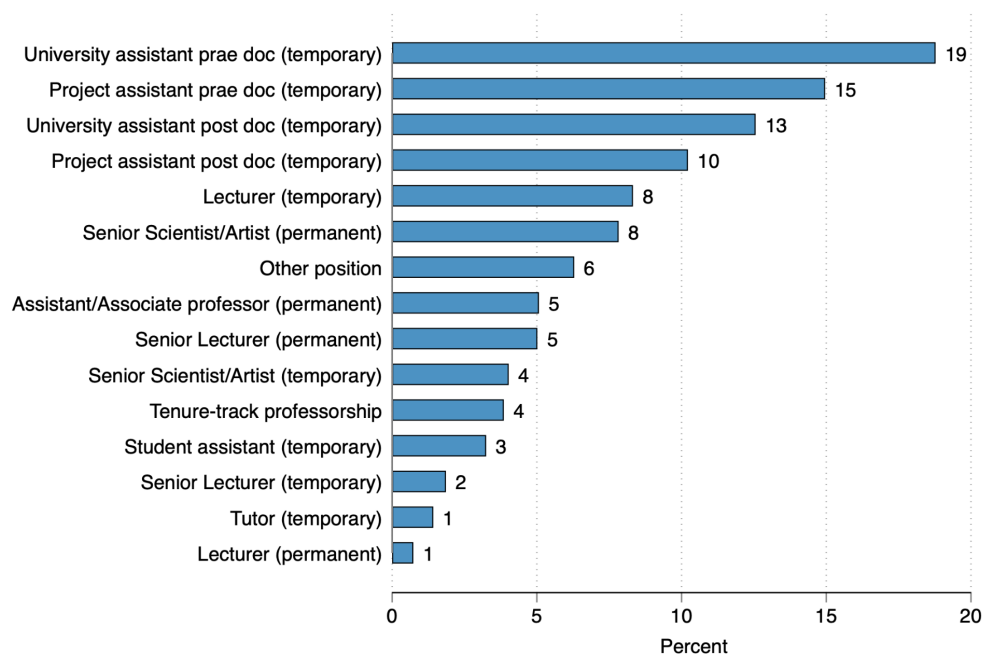


Figure 4: Type of Positions (Multiple Responses Possible)

Please note that the percentages do not sum to 100 percent, due to part-time employment and individuals holding multiple roles. For instance, some Senior Scientists indicated that they hold partially permanent positions, with the remainder of their funding coming from project-based contracts. About 10 percent of the respondents also mentioned that they are simultaneously employed at two or more universities. This is particularly common among temporary Lecturers, with approximately 28 percent of them working at multiple universities. These overlapping forms of employment reflect and underscore the complexity of academic employment structures, where part-time roles, dual affiliations, and mixed funding sources are prevalent (see also Section 4.2).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Perceived Level of Information and Affectedness

Figure 5 illustrates that a substantial portion of employees feels inadequately informed about the amendment to §109 UG, which came into force on October 1, 2021.<sup>6</sup> 44 percent of respondents indicate that they know “A Little” about the law, while 23 percent feel “Not at All” informed. In contrast, only 26 percent of respondents feel “Quite Well” informed, and just 6 percent believe they are “Very Well” informed. This distribution suggests that even one and a half years following the enactment of the amendment to §109 UG, most employees have a limited understanding of the legal framework. This pattern aligns with the findings from the previous report on the University of Vienna, where a similar lack of information and understanding among employees was highlighted as one of the key aspects, contributing to legal uncertainty and insufficient information about one’s career trajectory.

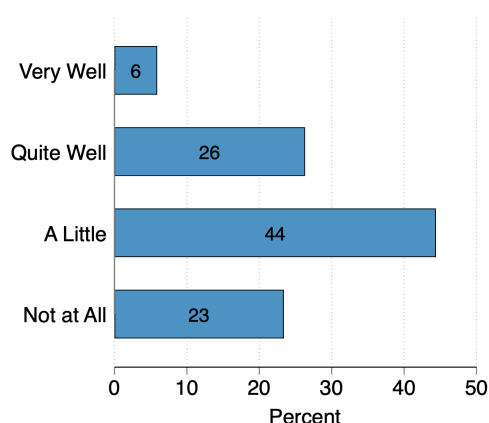


Figure 5: Perceived Level of Information About the Legal Framework

Figure 6 shows the perceived affectedness of both respondents themselves and their colleagues by the employment conditions across different time frames—past, present, and future. The graph shows that 37 percent of respondents felt personally affected in the past, with 50 percent not feeling affected and 13 percent unsure. At the time of the survey, 28 percent of respondents felt affected, 56 percent did not, and 16 percent were unsure. Looking to the future, 47 percent expected to be affected, while 24 percent did not, and 29 percent were uncertain. Regarding colleagues, a larger proportion feels affected across all time frames. In the past, 71 percent reported their colleagues being affected, with only 7 percent saying they were not, and 22 percent unsure. Similarly, 70 percent believe their colleagues are currently affected, while 10 percent do not, and 21 percent are uncertain. In the future, 71 percent expect their colleagues to be affected, with only 2 percent thinking they will not be, and 27 percent uncertain. Overall, these results align with the findings from the University of Vienna study,

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the survey question asked: “How well informed do you feel about the amendment to the University Act and the new chain contract regulation?”.

where a significant portion of respondents and their colleagues also felt affected by precarious employment conditions, particularly looking to the future.

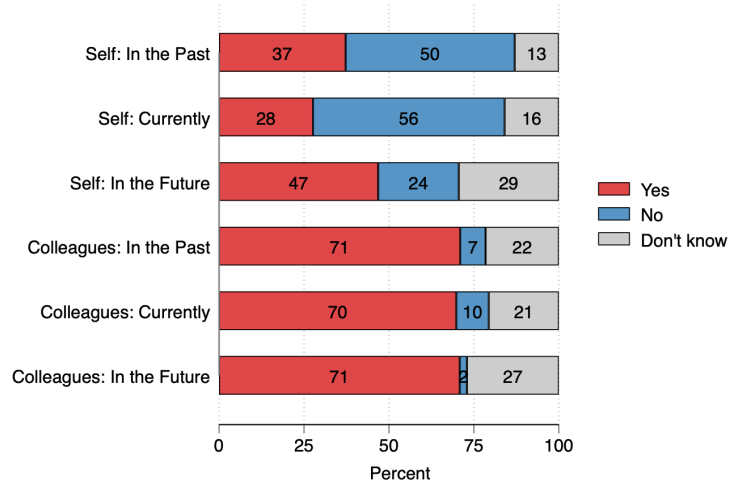


Figure 6: Perceived Affectedness by §109 UG

Respondents had the opportunity during the survey to describe, in their own words, how the amended §109 UG regulation (commonly referred to as the "chain contract" regulation, or *Kettenvertragsregelung*) affects them or their colleagues. A total of 1,554 participants provided responses, with seven excluded as non-responses (e.g., "Don't know"). Responses, which were submitted in both English and German, ranged from single words (e.g., "job loss" or "uncertainty") to longer statements of up to 212 words. Figure 7 presents a word cloud illustrating the most frequently used terms, with larger font sizes representing more common expressions. For instance, "uncertainty" (*Unsicherheit*) appeared 122 times in relation to how individuals are affected by the amended §109 UG.



Figure 7: Forms of Affectedness

The qualitative responses included personal stories, explanations of how individuals secured one of the few permanent positions, and expressions of frustration regarding the impact of fixed-term contracts on themselves or colleagues. Respondents also highlighted the broader effects on research teams, teaching, administration, and the overall quality of academic research. Predocs, postdocs, and research assistants with fixed-term contracts emphasized that the instability of their job situation significantly hinders their career and family planning. The analysis of these responses was conducted using Mayring's (2022) qualitative content analysis in its deductive form, breaking down theoretical themes into concrete analysis categories such as mental health, finances, family, pregnancy, child care, research (particularly third-party-funded projects), and teaching (specifically student support or thesis supervision). Special attention was given to responses by particular groups, whose positions are either relatively new or permanent, such as Senior Lecturers, Senior Scientists, Tenure-Track faculty, Associate Professors, and Full Professors. The groups affected most by fixed-term contracts (predocs, postdocs, and research assistants) outlined the most pressing issues in their own words.

A predoc: *"The job situation is very unstable. People often have to start looking for new job opportunities as soon as they start a job, instead of concentrating fully on the job. Or you may have to keep small jobs on the side to stabilize your job situation."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

A postdoc: *"Postdoc colleagues have already had to leave the university and have either lost or taken their externally funded projects with them. Predoc colleagues regularly have to leave the university or are employed as lecturers for a limited period of one semester. This makes career planning impossible. Family planning is also not possible. Even relocating is difficult, as there are always only fixed-term contracts."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Another postdoc: *"A main problem is that University has not learned to also quit people, as it is normal in Industry. They are so afraid of such a situation that they avoid any permanent contract and prefer to kick excellent people out of the system, even if they lose a PhD thesis, a successful completion, or an excellent teacher. However, people are constantly evaluated all the time (teaching evaluation, counted research activities)."*

Apart from personal affectedness in this qualitative part, there are reports on how the new regulation is shaping the working conditions for other employees as well. For example, permanent staff such as Full Professors, Associate Professors, or Senior Scientists express that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find qualified staff or that well-trained staff leave even though they are desperately needed.

A Full Professor: *"I can't fill positions despite multiple job advertisements. Colleagues who are highly competent leave, young potential colleagues don't even come to the university because of the supposedly poor working conditions."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

A Senior Scientist: *"Due to changes in personnel or the fact that the contract was not extended, equipment worth seven-figure sums was no longer in operation and we therefore achieved little to no results after the acquisition."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Above all, the statements illustrate the multifaceted effects of temporary positions on the university. Moreover, in addition to psychological stress (see figure 5, “Unsicherheit” being mentioned 122 times), many respondents report negative effects on the quality of teaching and research. The reported uncertainty also has a knock-on effect on family planning or creditworthiness.

*“[...] Many female colleagues put off having children because of the job until it was too late. They are now unhappy without a child and still have no job prospects.” (translated and grammatically corrected)*

*“[...] The university advertises itself as one of the employers with excellent services for its employees. In reality, it is a two-class system. It is certainly good for permanent staff, but really bad for non-permanent staff. Many PhD and PostDoc positions are vacant and cannot be filled at the moment as this becomes more widely known. Also, the university likes to advertise itself with nice research rankings. Most of the paper publications are the many hours of work of the non-permanent staff.” (grammatically corrected)*

*“[...] Many colleagues (about seven I have worked with) did not finish their doctoral studies because the funding ran out and the §109 regulation did not allow them to be rehired. In several of these cases, the university position would have been included in the group’s budget anyway. Nevertheless, they were unable to complete their studies. The teaching load is also high for PhD positions. The many changes in personnel make it difficult to build up long-term research goals in the research group and to maintain a high quality of teaching. You have to be prepared to work on unpaid tasks, such as supervising students (master’s and bachelor’s), which are not included in the teaching or research hours, which actually also applies to the permanent positions.” (grammatically corrected)*

The issue of unpaid overtime work is further substantiated by the quantitative data from the survey, which reveals that approximately 75 percent of respondents work beyond their contracted hours (see also Figure A1 in the Appendix). In summary, it became apparent that university employees know little about the effects of the amendment to §109 UG in force since October 2021. Some respondents are not even aware if and how they will be affected by the amended regulation. However, those who are currently affected already report about the negative effects on research, teaching, and personal life due to unsustainable working conditions.

## **4.2 Impact on Teaching and Research**

Figure 8 shows respondents’ agreement with various statements about the impact of current employment conditions on teaching and research. A significant 62 percent “completely agree” that research lacks continuity, while 30 percent “completely agree” that research is becoming less innovative. Additionally, 34 percent of respondents believe teaching staff have little time to support and supervise students. Concerns about the unity of teaching and research being reduced are shared by 31 percent, and 29 percent agree that project employees teach less frequently. Finally, 20 percent “completely agree” that the diversity of courses offered is decreasing. Overall, the data indicates strong concerns about both the quality of teaching and the continuity and innovation of research.

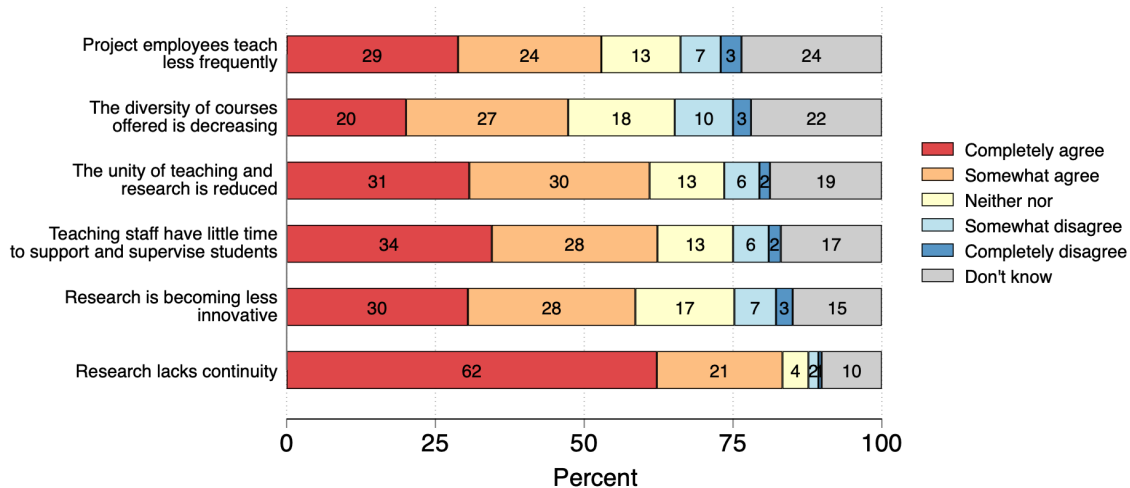


Figure 8: Perceived Impact on Teaching and Research

In the qualitative part, some respondents concretely addressed the negative effects on teaching. According to some respondents, the constant change of staff leads to a loss of knowledge about teaching and administrative aspects overall.

A professor: *“Highly qualified staff have to leave the university. This leads to a significantly higher workload, especially in teaching and clinical work. This also leaves hardly any time for science.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

A postdoc: *“The permanent staff are constantly under pressure because they always have to compensate for the missing positions and the (initial) lack of expertise. Someone always has to leave or be found and trained. This constant change is incredibly stressful and has nothing to do with normal staff turnover. New employees also change the dynamics in the team, so a little stability would be desirable.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

A predoc: *“For me as a young mother and young academic, who always endeavors to offer a varied and modern form of teaching and is therefore also confronted with numerous supervisions of final theses (which in turn are not remunerated, but also take up a lot of time), chain contracts are an absolutely unsatisfactory option.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

According to the respondents, even a small increase in job stability would significantly enhance their academic work. The current system, however, presents numerous frustrations, with many citing specific barriers that hinder their professional and personal progress across various aspects of their roles.

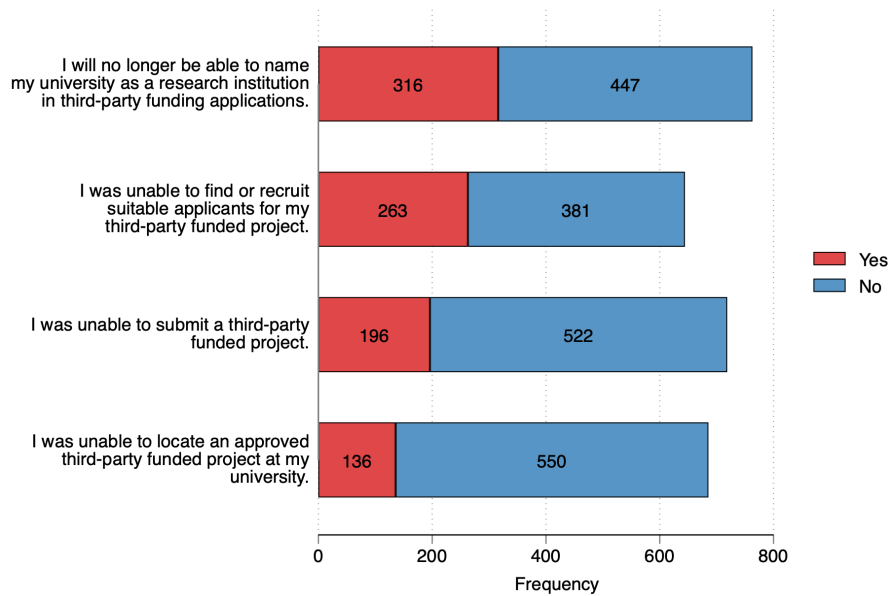


Figure 9: Impact on Third-Party Funded Projects

Figure 9 presents the absolute frequencies of responses regarding the impact on third-party funded projects. Since not all survey participants were involved in grant applications or projects, the results are reported in absolute numbers. The figure shows that 316 respondents indicated they will no longer be able to name their university as a research institution in third-party funding applications, while 447 said this would not be the case. Then, more than 50 percent of the postdocs with a fixed-term contract, who responded to this question with a definite answer ( $n=254$ ) will not be able to apply for third-party money at their institution. Additionally, 263 respondents were unable to find or recruit suitable applicants for their third-party funded projects, compared to 381 who did not face this issue. In relative terms, compared to the figures reported in the previous study at the University of Vienna, these findings suggest that recruitment issues may be even more pronounced at other universities. Overall, the results highlight the challenges faced by a substantial number of academics in managing and securing third-party funding within their institutions.

Among the predoctoral and postdoctoral researchers on fixed-term contracts funded by third-party sources who participated in the survey, the majority were supported by a single project, while nearly 20 percent were funded by two projects, and more than 10 percent by three or more projects. Most respondents received funding from public sources, with the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) accounting for the largest share at 40 percent. This was followed by the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) and the European Union, which funded 22 percent and 20 percent of respondents, respectively (see Figure 10).



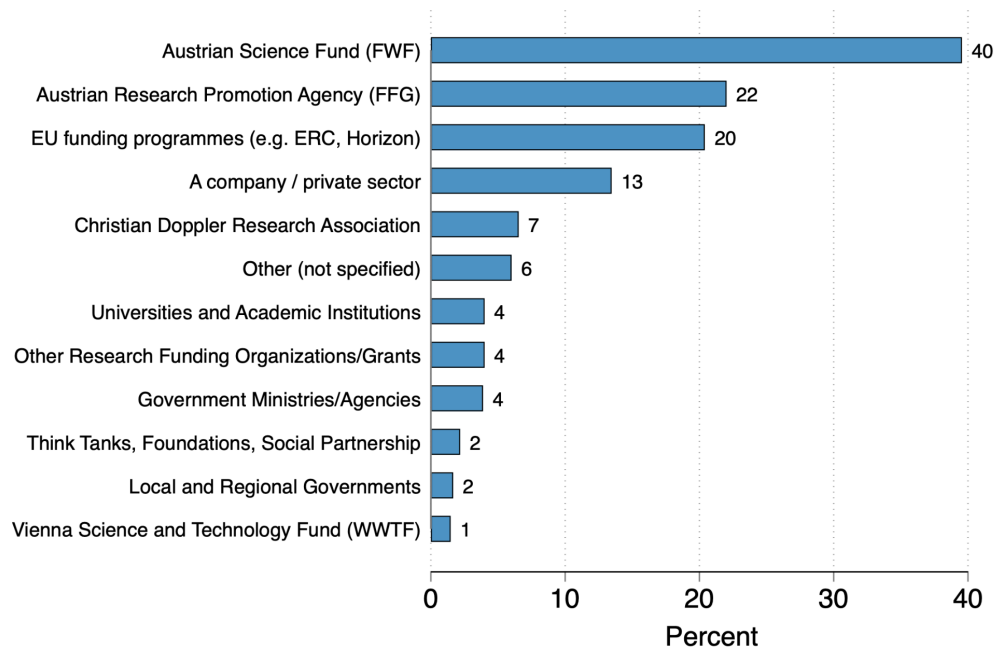


Figure 10: Source of Funding of Project Assistants (Multiple Responses Possible)

Private sector funding accounted for 13 percent of the projects, while 6 percent were funded by the Christian Doppler Research Association, which operates through a hybrid funding model with financial contributions from private industry partners. Additional sources of funding included universities and academic institutions (4 percent), other research funding organizations and grant providers (4 percent), government ministries and agencies (4 percent), think tanks, foundations, and social partnerships (2 percent), local and regional governments (2 percent), and the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (1 percent). An additional 6 percent of funding came from other unspecified sources.

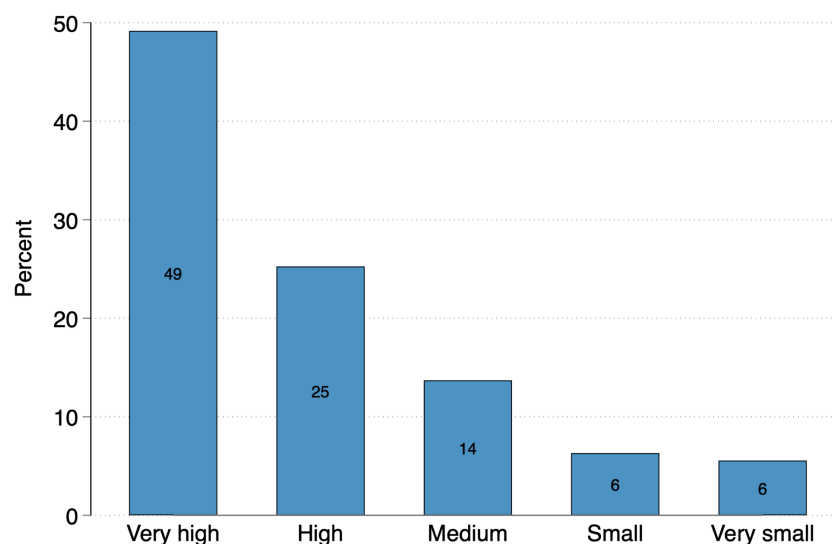


Figure 11: Risk of No Funding / Funding Gap Within the Next Four Years

Nearly 50 percent of the respondents funded by third-party sources indicate that they face a “very high” risk of no funding or a funding gap within the next four years. An additional 25 percent estimate

this risk to be “high,” meaning that a total of 74 percent of respondents perceive a significant threat to their future funding (see Figure 11). In contrast, only 12 percent assess this risk as “small” or “very small.” Among different funding sources, respondents funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) anticipate the highest risk, with 78 percent estimating the risk to be “very high” or “high,” compared to 12 percent who consider the risk to be “small” or “very small” (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). For those funded by the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG), the perceived risk is somewhat lower, with 62 percent estimating a “very high” or “high” risk, while 19 percent consider the risk “small” or “very small.” Overall, these findings suggest that the competitive funding environment, characterized by the significant effort required for preparing applications and low to moderate chances of success (Altreiter et al., 2024; Schweiger, 2023; Schweiger et al., 2024; FWF, 2024), combined with the absence of structures to ensure a permanent and steady flow of research income, these conditions significantly contribute to the job uncertainty that academic staff face.

### 4.3 Prospects to Achieve Permanency and Desired Future Career

The qualitative part of the survey underscores the impact of a lack of permanency due to the high proportion of fixed-term personnel. Respondents experience the aforementioned funding issues in their daily work as inconsistencies and a “threat” to research.

A University assistant (permanent): *“The continuation of projects is threatened when project staff who have dedicated time and energy to this topic have to leave the university and take their expertise with them. You lose well-trained employees who would like to stay and often cannot submit follow-up projects because their implementation is jeopardized without staff with the appropriate expertise. Projects are now failing not because you can’t raise funds, but because you lose staff with the relevant expertise, even though you could still finance them. There is an urgent need for an exemption regulation for third-party funded projects! [...] The application situation is poor because applicants often choose areas of work where there is a greater choice of jobs, especially if they know that they will have to leave after a few years anyway. Jobs often remain vacant for longer because there are no interested candidates. Motivation often wanes towards the end of employment. The mind is already occupied with the next job search.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

A Tenure-Track Professor (with current qualification agreement): *“At regular intervals, (well-functioning) working groups are torn apart. The need to constantly acquire new third-party funding reduces research performance, as a large amount of time (more than usual) has to be spent on acquiring positions.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Several survey respondents mention the on-the-job training that new colleagues receive as a pain point. They express that this training feels like a wasted investment or drains their mental resources. As the new colleagues are not made permanent even though their work is needed. Therefore, motivation plummets. Some permanent staff describe their frustration with the ongoing fluctuation of colleagues as follows.

A Senior Scientist: *"I lead a working group and have often trained people for further employment at the university. Despite the available third-party funding that I acquire, I am not allowed to continue to employ these people. Hardly any other institution handles its human resources as badly as the domestic universities. People who want to realize themselves in the academic field despite the not particularly good working conditions and who often also have knowledge and talent for science are hindered and prevented from practicing their profession by the current legal framework."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Furthermore, some respondents with permanent contracts report that it is often unclear why some colleagues with good work records are not made permanent despite available funding.

An Associate Professor: *"I manage a unit with 20 employees (approx. 12 full-time equivalents). The top performers in this unit, some of whom have managerial roles themselves, have to leave as soon as they have really grown into it, even though they finance their position themselves, publish, research, and teach for the university. [...] Good, dynamic employees often leave the university well before the end of their chain contract due to the lack of prospects. In a few individual cases, colleagues have been successfully made permanent, but this requires an incredible amount of effort (including emotional), 'door-to-door canvassing' and is sometimes based on crazy deals. [...] I would like to see clear (preferably performance-related!) criteria for the termination of contracts and contracts with a cancellation clause."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Qualitative responses partially outline a common theme of witnessed and future brain drain. Young researchers voice their frustrations and vulnerability regarding the current employment practices. However, also more senior staff report on these dynamics.

A postdoc: *"Research projects have to be docked at other universities in other cities. I personally and my colleagues see our prospects dwindling in Austria and are orienting ourselves towards going abroad in the long term. The chain contract regulation creates extreme uncertainty with regard to career planning and life in general. It is also incomprehensible why investments are made in young academics only to force them to emigrate."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

A predoc: *"I have no possibility of continued employment in the form of a permanent position, so I have the choice between completely withdrawing from (university) research or moving abroad (when you reach this point in your career, you are very often, especially as a woman, at an age when you are thinking about family planning). In such cases, emigration is rarely an option."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Regarding fixed-term contracts, another predoc pointed out that *"The result is an exodus to the economy or other areas. Science is therefore mainly carried out by overworked professors and postdocs and then passed on to students, some of whom are underqualified."* (translated and grammatically corrected)

The qualitative elaborations also describe the experienced inconsistencies under the current regulation since permanency seems elusive.

An Associate Professor: *“The departure of excellent academics and colleagues who fit well into the team; loss of expertise in teaching”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Another Associate Professor (different university): *“No career perspective, as the employee ‘hits a wall’. Career plans should not be based on an employment ban.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Although the current regulation is not, strictly speaking, an "employment ban," respondents still perceive it as such in practice. Their feedback highlights the gap between the intended goals of the 2021 amendment to §109 UG – improving career prospects and increasing job permanency at Austria’s universities – and the actual outcomes. The experiences shared by respondents suggest that the anticipated benefits have yet to materialize, with many still facing limited opportunities for long-term employment.

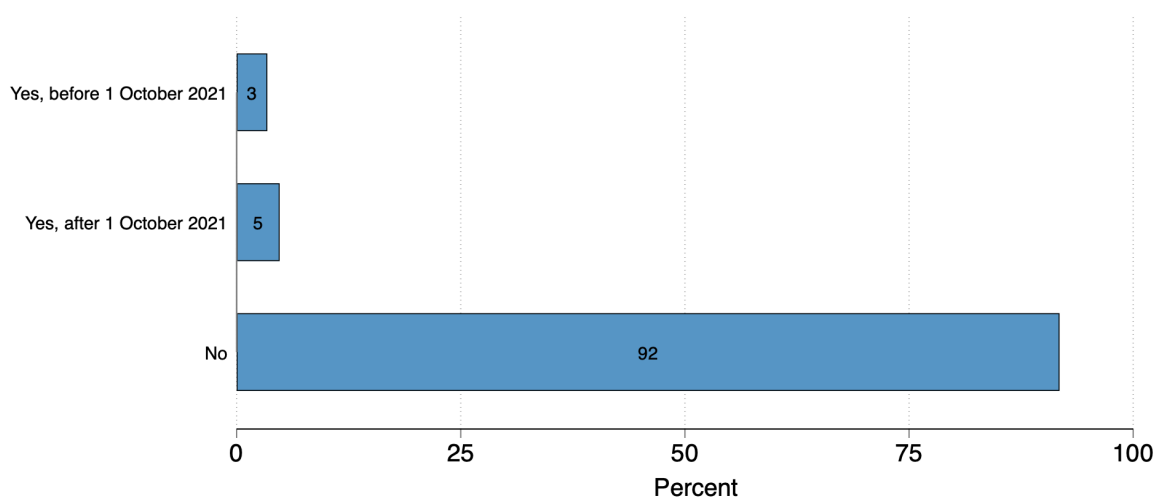


Figure 12: Offered Permanency (if on a fixed-term contract currently)

Figure 12 displays the percentage of respondents currently on fixed-term contracts who were offered a pathway to permanency. The majority, 92 percent, reported that they were not offered such a pathway. Only a very small proportion, 3 percent, were offered a pathway before October 1, 2021, and 5 percent were offered a pathway after this date. This highlights the limited opportunities for fixed-term contract employees to transition into permanent positions, reflecting the ongoing challenges in achieving job security within the academic sector in Austria.



Figure 13: Suggestions for Improvement

Figure 13 illustrates the most commonly mentioned terms in response to the question of how the employment situation in academia can be improved. The most prominent words, such as "permanent" (*unbefristete*), "positions" (*Stellen*), and "contracts" (*Verträge*), highlight the widespread call for more permanent positions and secure contracts. Other significant terms, including "research" (*Forschung*), "teaching" (*Lehre*), and "universities" (*Universitäten*), reflect the desire for improvements in both research and teaching environments, underlining the importance of stability in academic roles.

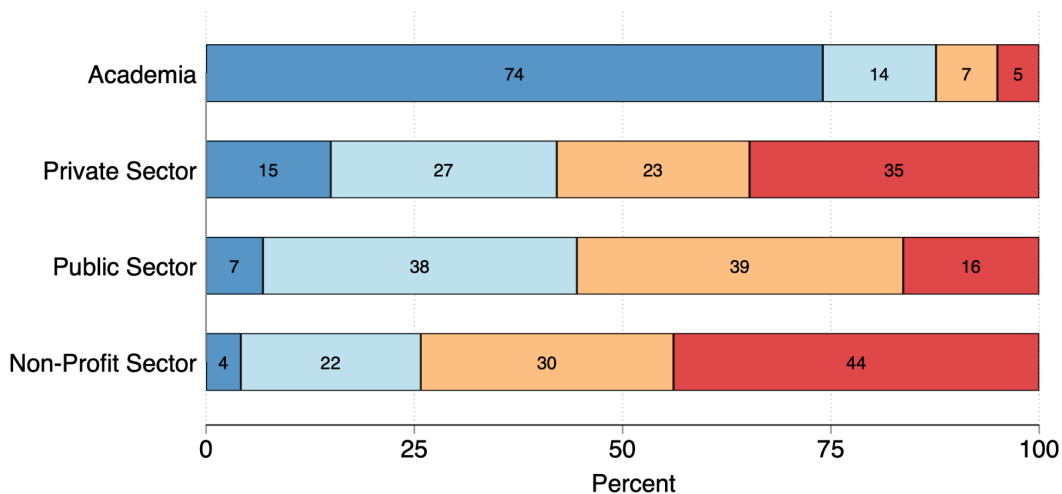


Figure 14: Preferred Career Sector (Ranking)

Figure 14 displays the ranking of preferred sectors in which respondents would like to pursue their professional careers, with "1" indicating their first choice. The majority, 74 percent, prefers academia as their top choice, followed by 14 percent ranking it second. In contrast, the private sector is a less favored option, with only 15 percent ranking it as their first choice and 35 percent ranking it as their last. The public sector has a more balanced distribution, with 7 percent placing it first and 39 percent ranking it third. The non-profit sector is the least preferred, with only 4 percent selecting it as their top choice, while 44 percent rank it as their last choice. While academia is the most preferred career

sector across all age groups in the survey, with a consistently high percentage ranking it as their top choice, younger cohorts exhibit greater variability in their preferences, with more balanced rankings across sectors compared to older groups (see Figure A3 in the Appendix). This suggests that the current system, where career decisions are made relatively late, may not be ideal, as the preference to remain in academia tends to solidify over time, leading to a potentially high emotional cost for those who face challenges leaving academia later in their careers next to high monetary cost for a system that first invests and then drops highly educated scholars.

Despite the preference for academia, the career opportunities for permanent positions at universities remain severely limited. This limitation is highlighted by respondents' frustrations, as reflected in statements such as:

*“There are constant problems with further employment and promotion opportunities. The opportunities for permanent positions are only possible via very limited qualification positions, which focus exclusively on research performance and therefore do not fulfill the additional requirements of clinical and teaching work.”* (translated and grammatically corrected)

Given these challenges, there is a strong desire for more permanent positions in the academic sector.

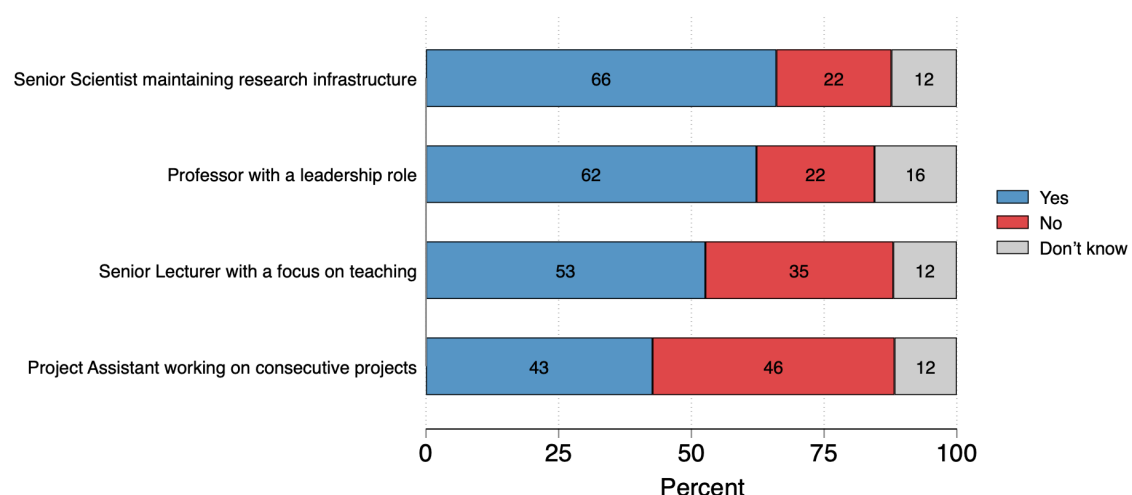


Figure 15: Preferred Career Model

Figure 15 further explores this sentiment by illustrating respondents' preferences for specific career models. The model that most respondents can imagine working in is that of a Senior Scientist maintaining research infrastructure, with 66 percent of positive responses, immediately followed by the professorship with 62 percent of positive responses. Additionally, 53 percent of respondents are open to the career model of Senior Lecturer with a focus on teaching. The opportunity to work as a Project Assistant on diverse consecutive projects, which is often susceptible to the vagaries of funding availability, would be valued by only 43 percent, making it the least favored option among those presented. Overall, these findings highlight the need for diversified career paths that provide stability and align with the varied aspirations of academic staff, ensuring a more equitable and sustainable academic environment.

## 5 Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive examination of the employment conditions and challenges faced by the *Mittelbau* staff across Austrian universities, broadening the scope beyond the University of Vienna. The survey, targeting academic staff below the rank of full professor, highlighted several key aspects of precarious employment. The findings indicate persistent issues, including inadequate information about legal frameworks, widespread job insecurity, and negative impacts on both teaching and research. A significant proportion of respondents report feeling affected by these conditions, with concerns about the continuity and innovation of research and teaching, as well as the limited opportunities for career advancement for those on fixed-term contracts.

Based on the findings of this study, several key actions can be taken to improve the employment situation for academic staff at Austrian public universities. Addressing these issues will require coordinated efforts from university administrations, policymakers, and academic representatives. In the following, we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to creating a more sustainable and supportive academic environment.

### 1) Improving Legal Awareness, Career Coaching, and Coping Strategies

In response to growing precarity and its detrimental effects on mental health and academic performance, some institutions have introduced efforts to equip individual scholars with better coping strategies. These initiatives aim to provide early-career academics with more information, enabling them to make informed career decisions and consider alternative paths outside academia. One key advantage of this approach is that it can be implemented unilaterally by universities, without the need for changes to the legal framework and with minimal budgetary implications. While this approach may offer temporary relief, it is unlikely to solve the underlying structural problems.

Though individual researchers might opt out of precarious academic careers, this simply opens the door for the next generation of hopeful scholars, perpetuating the cycle of "cruel optimism"—where new cohorts aspire to permanent positions but ultimately face the same dead-end, leading to burnout and frustration. Raising awareness to the point where capable scholars actively avoid risking their mental health may also deter the most talented individuals from pursuing academic careers, further worsening the already significant recruitment challenges for qualified staff.

Initiatives such as career coaching or training for transitioning out of academia (e.g., founding of start-ups) may help improve career advancement on an individual level, but they do not address the root of the problem: precarious positions are the rule and career perspectives are largely non-existent. To break this cycle, structural reform is essential, ensuring that the brightest minds can thrive in academia without compromising their well-being or career prospects.

## **2) Organizational Planning, Permanency Targets, and Flexible Career Development**

An alternative, more long-term approach shifts the focus from the individual to the organizational level, aiming to develop the institution to rely more heavily on permanent staff. One advantage of this strategy is that the Austrian higher education system already operates as a hybrid model (Kreckel, 2016), which, at least on paper, offers permanent career options beyond professorships, such as Senior Scientist and Senior Lecturer roles. Although these roles exist, they have not been widely utilized, with some Austrian universities making more progress than others.

What is currently lacking, however, is comprehensive organizational planning for positions below the professorship level. Addressing this would involve creating a staffing plan (*Stellenplan/Personalstrukturplan*) that encompasses all academic roles – not only/mainly professorships and tenure-track positions. In addition to setting global targets for permanency, universities could be assigned individual permanency targets and required to present detailed organizational development plans, particularly focusing on creating clear paths to permanency for academic staff, especially postdocs.

New career paths should facilitate not only vertical progression toward professorships but also horizontal mobility between different roles. For instance, transitions between academic and administrative positions should be made more flexible to support a wider range of career aspirations. This flexibility would enable academics to diversify their skill sets and navigate different types of roles within the university.

Moreover, the design of new career paths must address the gendered dynamics of academic careers and consider potential impacts on family planning. Women remain underrepresented among permanently employed university staff, particularly in leadership roles, making it essential to integrate gender equity into these plans. By addressing these disparities, universities can foster a more inclusive, supportive environment that benefits all academic staff and strengthens their institutions as a whole.

## **3) Career Perspectives and Routes to Permanency for Project Staff**

A key focus of this report is on positions funded by third-party projects. While a significant portion of this funding originates from public sources, the risk of funding gaps between projects remains considerable, with the acquisition of third-party funding often resembling a lottery due to the competitive and unpredictable nature of securing grants. To address this challenge, it would be beneficial to develop models that combine project-based funding with more secure and permanent employment options for project staff.

One potential solution is the introduction of a "rucksack" system, in which third-party funds are pooled to create reserves from project surpluses. These reserves could be used to provide interim financing for project staff, bridging gaps between successive projects or compensating for shortfalls in third-party-funded positions (e.g., for at least six months). This approach would offer greater job security and career continuity for project-funded personnel, reducing



their vulnerability to the uncertainties of intermittent funding. Alternatively, global budget funds could be allocated specifically to cover such gaps.

By implementing such a system, universities can foster a more sustainable and supportive environment for project staff, allowing them to focus on their research without the constant concern of losing their positions due to the unpredictable nature of third-party funding.

The insights from this study highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms in the Austrian academic sector. By addressing the identified challenges through targeted policy measures, universities can foster a more supportive and sustainable environment for their academic staff. This, in turn, will not only enhance the quality of teaching and research but also ensure the long-term viability and success of the academic profession in Austria.

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## Appendix

### A. Additional Figures

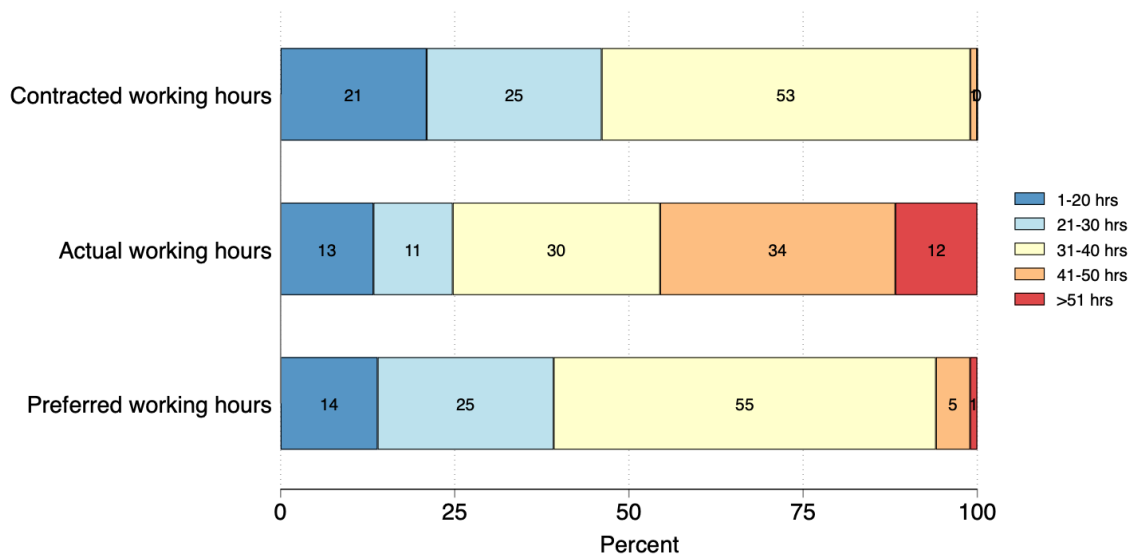


Figure A1: Working Hours

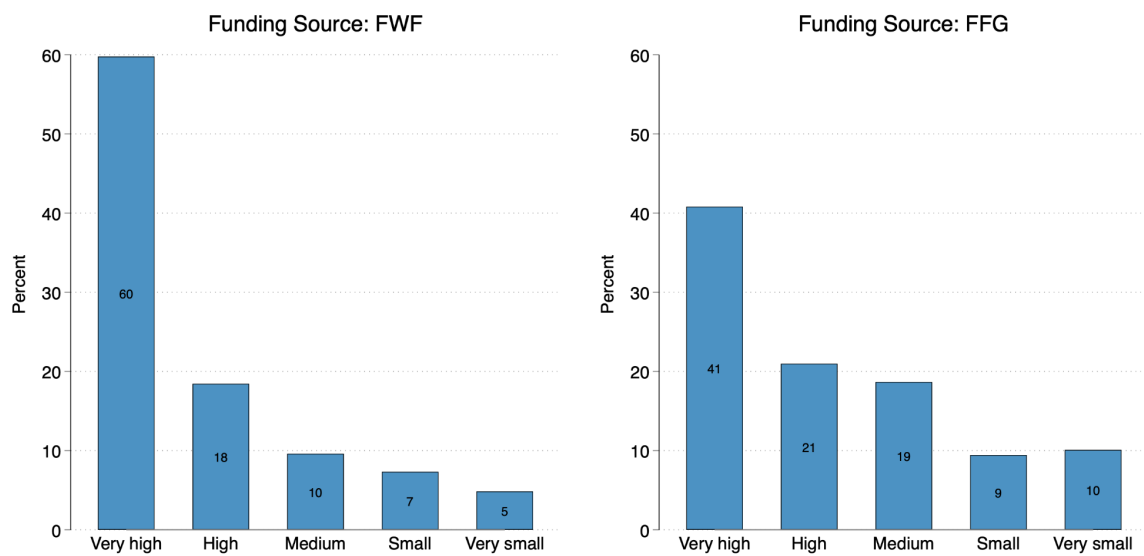


Figure A2: Risk of No Funding / Funding Gap Within the Next Four Years By Funding Source

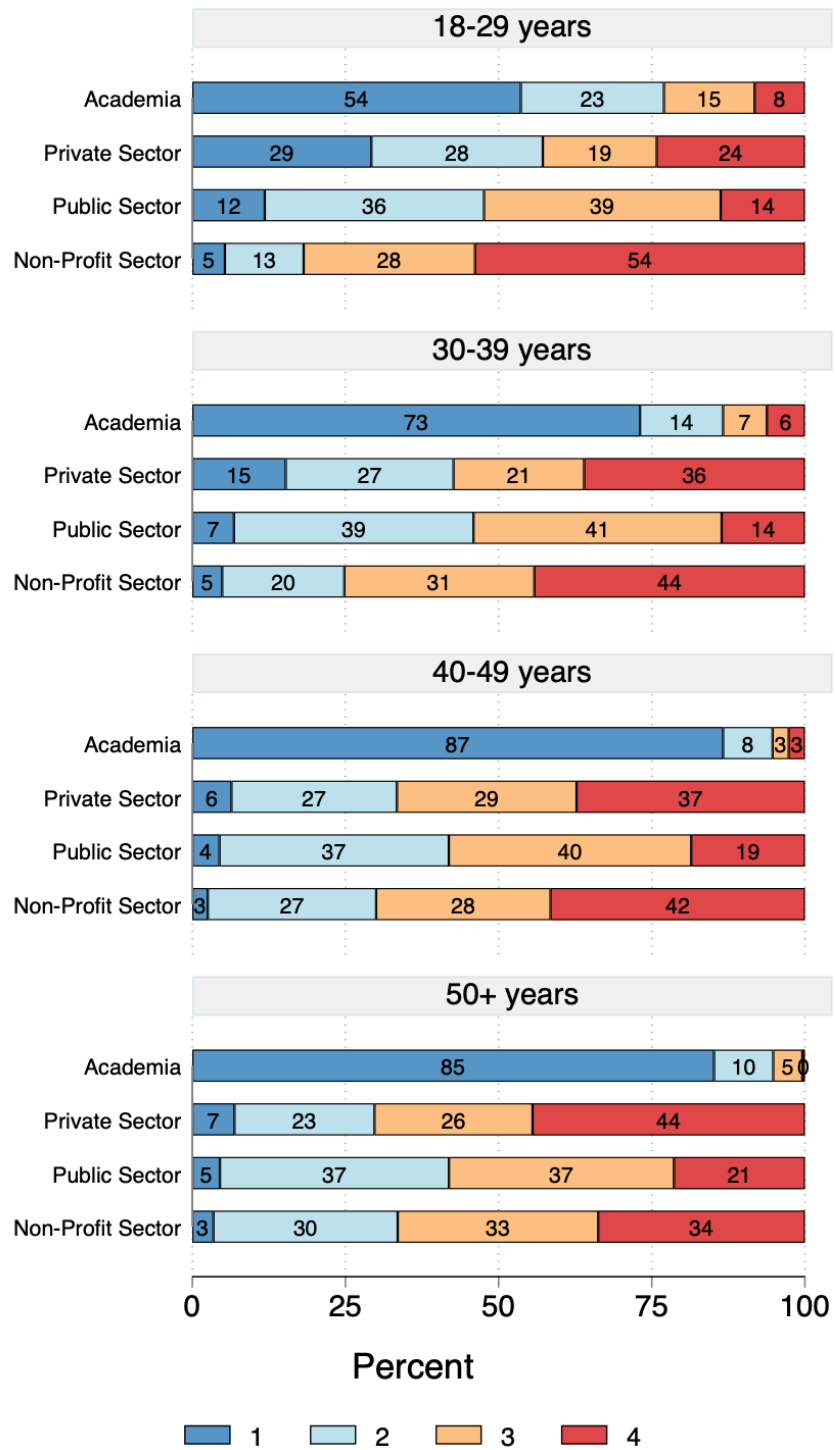


Figure A3: Preferred Sector by Age Group (Ranking)