The FWF's 2025 Survey of the Austrian Research Community

Final report written by SPECTRA MarktforschungsgmbH

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I Objective

- The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) supports the further development of Austrian science and basic research according to international standards. Funding programs and processes are evaluated on a regular basis to ensure quality. This project is part of the ongoing quality assurance process.
- Picking up where earlier studies in 2002 and 2013 left off, the online survey provides up-to-date insights into the opinions and attitudes of the scientific community on various aspects of the FWF and the Austrian research landscape as a whole. The 2025 survey places a special focus on postdocs' working conditions – both in general and specifically in FWF-funded projects.

Schedule

- The field phase took place in May and June 2025.

Sample

- The scientific community in Austria that is potentially eligible to apply for FWF funding includes a total of around 20,000 researchers. Of these, n=3,368 researchers took part in the survey and shared their experiences and assessments. The answers depict perspectives from 40 different university and non-university research institutions.

Dashboard

- A dashboard is available for a detailed analysis of the survey: https://spectra.datalion.net/455004-fwf-2025

II Contracts and working hours

Everyday working life is characterized by fixed-term contracts, significant overtime (on average 45 hours of actual weekly working time), and working on weekends. Permanent positions are sought after, but the chances of getting one are considered low.

- Slightly more than half of the participating researchers (58%) are employed on a fixed-term basis. Especially for women and people below the age of 40, fixed-term contracts are the norm rather than the exception.
- The duration of such fixed-term contracts varies widely. 42% of the reported fixed-term contracts run for 36 months or longer. Such durations are more likely to be found in the (older) R3 and R4 researcher range. Shorter fixed-term contracts tend to affect (younger) R1 and R2 researchers. A quarter of fixed-term contracts end after only a maximum of 12 months.[1]
- R2/R3 researchers with fixed-term contracts are predominantly (86%) looking for a permanent position in the academic field. The chance of getting such a job is (on average) relatively sobering at just 25%.
- Regardless of whether employment is on a part-time or full-time basis, overtime is worked almost everywhere. The actual average (median and mean) working time per week is 45 hours. Weekly working hours increase with age, regardless of gender.
- Working on weekends is common and widespread. One-third of respondents report working on one weekend per month, and one-third on two to three weekends. Only 18% of researchers with an employment contract never work on weekends (this proportion is significantly higher for women under 40).

[1] **R1-First Stage Researcher** = Researchers doing research under supervision up to the point of a PhD or equivalent level of competence and experience;

R2-Recognised Researchers = Researchers with a PhD or equivalent level of competence and experience who have not yet established a significant level of independence in developing their own research, attracting funding, or leading a research group;

R3-Established Researchers = Researchers with a PhD or equivalent level of competence and experience who are able to independently develop their own research, attract funding, and lead a research group;

R4-Leading Researchers = Researchers with a PhD or equivalent level of competence and experience who are recognised as leading their research field by their peers

III Activities & career goals

Not quite half of researchers' annual working hours are spent on research. Administration/management takes as much time as teaching. Researchers under 30 are more likely to think about switching to business/industry.

- Research activities take up 46% of the working time of researchers under employment contracts. Researchers' working hours are otherwise spent teaching (15%), on administration/management (13%), on supervision (9%), and acquiring third-party funding (8%). A few blocks of time shift over the course of a career: The number of hours spent on research decreases with age, while the time required for teaching and acquiring third-party funding increases. Among the scientific disciplines, the natural sciences and life sciences spend the most time on research, while the humanities and social sciences spend more time on teaching than other disciplines.
- Around half (48%) of the academics in question are working on further qualifications (post-doctoral thesis, tenure track, etc.). Researchers (with a self-assessment of R1 to R3) are more likely to have a professorship (43%) as their long-term career goal than another position in research and teaching (35%). 10% are currently considering leaving academia and taking on a management role in business/industry. However, this proportion is twice as high in the under-30 age group (23%) as in the total sample.

IV Research budgets and third-party funding

The acquisition of third-party funding is key for research, as it makes up the majority of the research budget. Fewer than half of the respondents have additional funding available from their research institutions, and it depends on the acquisition of third-party funding and the quantity/quality of publications.

- A third of the relevant sample depends (almost) entirely on third-party funds to finance their research (between 90 and 100% of funding). On average, 64% of the research budget comes from third-party funding. Researchers from the life sciences, natural sciences, and technical sciences are most dependent on such third-party funding.
- 43% of the researchers surveyed are aware of additional funding available from their own research institution. These funds are somewhat more common in the life sciences (57%) and medicine (63%), as well as in the field of R4 researchers (56%).
- If there is additional funding from the research institution, it mostly depends on third-party funding (66%). Other important factors are the number of publications (53%) and the excellence of these publications (51%).
- Almost all of the researchers surveyed are familiar with the FWF as a funding organization for scientific research. 74% know the funding programs, another 23% know the FWF superficially, i.e., at least by name. A look at the disciplines shows that awareness of FWF funding programs is lower in the technical sciences than in other scientific fields.

V The FWF as a funding institution

Most respondents were familiar with the FWF as a funding institution. Many make contact with the FWF through joint research projects. Non-application rates to the FWF can be explained by a lack of experience, researchers' position in the hierarchy, or an unfavorable cost-benefit calculation.

- The majority (72%) of researchers who are familiar with the FWF have already been involved in applying for or conducting an FWF research project, in most cases in the role of applicant/principal investigator (45%) or project staff member (35%). Age is a factor in the type of experience with the FWF: In many cases, researchers under the age of 30 have either had no contact with the FWF at all or only in the role of project staff. From around the age of 40, the picture begins to change significantly and respondents report experience with the FWF from the perspective of an applicant/principal investigator.
- Failure to apply to the FWF for research funding as the main applicant is usually due to three factors:
- Insufficient experience with the application process (35%), too high a risk of rejection in relation to the application effort (28%), and the application being submitted by a higher-ranked researcher (26%) were cited as the main reasons. However, the reasons mentioned are clearly correlated with age. Younger scientists often lack experience or applications are submitted by someone else. Older researchers, on the other hand, find that the risk of rejection is too high in relation to the effort involved, that applying to other funding organizations is more promising, or that their own research is too application-oriented (and the FWF therefore does not offer suitable funding). The topic "own research too application-oriented" is mainly mentioned by researchers in technical fields. Their third-party funding therefore often comes from industry/the private sector.

VI Funding institutions

The clear majority of applicants turn to FWF for research funding. However, the ratio of application effort vs. potential funding amount is rated worse for the FWF than for other major Austrian funding institutions.

- Of all main funding applicants, 84% have submitted an application to the FWF in the last 5 years. This makes the FWF the funding institution of choice for a clear majority of researchers. 31% have applied to the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) and between a fifth and a quarter have applied to the European Commission, the federal states, the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the European Research Council, and private institutions. As a researcher's career progresses – from R4 to R3 to R2 – the range of funding providers they encounter tends to broaden.
- However, the efforts involved in applying and the potential yield are assessed very differently. Applications to international institutions like the European Commission or the ERC are considered to be very effort-intensive in comparison to the potential funding amount. For the FWF, the result is somewhat more moderate, but also double-edged: 40% consider the application effort vs. potential return to be appropriate, 52% find the effort rather high/very high. Respondents rated the efforts required for applying to other Austrian funding bodies such as the FFG, the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the federal states, and private funding bodies (measured in terms of outcome) as lower that applying to the FWF.

VII Working with the FWF

Information, guidelines, the application process, and consulting services were given good grades. Room for improvement remains in the transparency of the decision-making process and the reasons why proposals are rejected.

- The administration of FWF applications/projects is rated by respondents differently depending on the project phase. Statements such as “The FWF's application guidelines are easy to understand” (78%), “The online submission tool on the FWF website is easy to understand and simple to use” (73%), “The information provided on the website is clear and easy to understand” (71%), or “The FWF offers good consulting and support” (62%) were met with high levels of approval (5-4 on the 5-point Likert scale used). So when it comes to information, accessibility, and support, respondents rated the FWF’s work very positively. The picture changes when it comes to the processing of applications and decisions. Respondents’ ratings for statements such as “The processing of applications by the FWF is unbureaucratic” (52%), “The principles of the assessment and decision-making process are transparent and adequately communicated” (48%), and especially for “Grounds for rejection of research applications are generally understandable” (21%) were not as good, in comparison.
- When it comes to FWF’s funding programs and measures, it is striking that a considerable number of researchers who are likely to have encountered them are unable to say anything about them. This lack of knowledge/non-assessment is particularly high in the case of measures related to research integrity/ethics, excellence initiative funding programs or, for example, the evaluation of funding programs and studies on the decision-making process. Among respondents who are aware of these activities, approval rates are high. This applies, for example, to FWF informational events (including coaching workshops), open science funding, or the availability of funding statistics.

VIII Postdocs' situation

Junior researchers are struggling with uncertain career prospects. Strict hierarchies, arduous paths to higher qualifications, and less attractive incomes further complicate these researchers' professional lives. Third-party funds and internal networks should be given lower priority in performance assessment.

- Early-stage researchers (R2+R3) struggle primarily with one problem: 64% "Strongly agree" that they face uncertain career prospects. A further 18% agree with this statement with some reservations. This means that 8 out of 10 postdocs have clear doubts about their career prospects in academia. This situation is not made any easier by a long qualification process (21% strongly agree), non-competitive income opportunities (21%), and hierarchical structures that negatively impact self-employment (25%). While these pain points do exist, they apparently have less of an impact on young academics than a lack of career prospects/opportunities.

  On a more detailed level, it becomes clear that this issue applies to all scientific disciplines. However, junior researchers in the biosciences also express clearer criticism of hierarchical structures and identify a lack of adequate consulting and support.

- There is a clear gap between the status quo and the target with regard to performance appraisal criteria. Academic publications are currently the decisive criterion for most respondents. Respondents view this positively and don't want it to change. Other currently decisive criteria are third-party funding and internal networks. Researchers would like these aspects to be much less important. Compared to the status quo, teaching, science communication, and social relevance should play a much greater role in performance assessment.

IX Postdocs and supervisors/mentors

Supervisors in academia create a pleasant working atmosphere and are generally open and supportive. Concrete implementation and, above all, strategic planning are viewed less positively.

- Respondents are somewhat ambivalent about the performance of supervisors and mentors, depending on various aspects. The social component is satisfactory ("Creating a pleasant working atmosphere"), and colleagues get along well. Junior researchers are encouraged to be independent and there is openness and a willingness to allow younger researchers to find their own scientific narrative. However, supervisors were rated slightly lower on understanding/supporting academic concerns, clarity of explanations and, most importantly, creating a strategic plan to achieve junior staff's goals. To oversimplify, while there is goodwill and general support for the concerns of junior researchers in a socially pleasant environment, when it comes to concrete implementation, clear explanations, or strategic planning, performance drops off.
- On the other hand, the majority of respondents have not experienced problematic behaviors from supervisors. Around a fifth of postdocs report "Requiring work well below my qualifications," "Issuing an unmanageable workload," or "Assigning tasks with unreasonable deadlines." This means that where supervisors' behavior is problematic, it usually manifests as requiring an excessive workload.

X Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is good overall. One disadvantage is a lack of work-life balance (workload). Uncertainty due to fixed-term contracts, serial short-term employment, and uncertain career development options make half of respondents doubt their own academic future.

- 19% of academics are very satisfied with their professional situation overall, a further 45% are satisfied. A mean value of 3.71 on a 5-point scale (5=very satisfied=best value) is a solid result and shows that the majority of respondents have a positive overall view of their own profession. Aspects that are viewed more critically are the professional position, teaching activities, and especially the work-life balance. Here, too, it can be assumed that the assessment is characterized by the (often significant) workload/number of hours and the number of responsibilities. The figures show that in general, the work-life balance in academia is viewed more critically by women of all ages than by their male counterparts.
- Although many respondents expressed overall satisfaction with their professional situation, half of the researchers surveyed have seriously considered leaving academia in the last 24 months. These thoughts are disproportionately strong among people in their twenties and thirties. Regardless of gender, three decisive factors apply: The issues “Temporary nature of the job” and “Serial short-term contracts” affect all age groups, but are even more unsatisfactory for researchers under the age of 30. Uncertain career development is a factor that causes doubt between the ages of 30 and 49. Although discrimination plays a minor role overall, the data shows one exception: Women aged 40 and over experience discrimination more frequently, which causes some some women to doubt their future academic careers.

XI Discrimination and good scientific practice

Women are more affected by discrimination than men and are more aware of the issue. Gender discrimination is the most common, but discrimination based on ethnic origin and age are also reported. Violations of academic integrity are generally due to problems with authorship.

- 27% of researchers reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace themselves or witnessing it happening to others. Experiences of discrimination are experienced/reported more by women than by men. Regardless of whether experienced or witnessed, gender/gender identity is the most common reason for discrimination (reported by 19% of all respondents), followed by ethnic origin and age. The combination of gender and age discrimination plays a greater role for older women in their personal experience and makes them doubt whether they will remain in academia (see career satisfaction).
- Violations of academic integrity are reported more frequently than discrimination, and have been observed by 56% of the researchers surveyed. At the top of the list are “Non-contributing authorship” (reported by 34%) and “Irresponsible review practices” (27%). Women over 40 in particular report the “Use of third-party ideas without indication of origin (e.g., plagiarism, theft of ideas).” A look at the scientific disciplines shows that non-contributing authorship or denied authorship despite contribution is an even greater problem in the life sciences and medicine.

XII The academic system

Respondents expressed clear wishes for reforms with regard to open-ended contracts, flatter hierarchies, more opportunities for research, and increased quality/efficiency through open science. The existing system is rated as efficient, but lacks social recognition.

- In terms of possible reforms, there is majority support (in some cases very clear support) for “Increasing the number and type of permanent positions below professorships” (76% strongly in favor), “Stronger promotion of open science (58%), “More extensive opportunities for time off for research” (46%), and the “Implementation of flatter hierarchies” (46%). At the other end of the spectrum are “Reduction in the number of dissertations,” “Reduction in the number of funding organizations,” or “Reduction in the number of universities and research institutions.” These proposed reforms are met with widespread rejection.
- The Austrian science system was given the best marks for autonomy and freedom of research (75% excellent or good). The social relevance of research, performance in international comparison, and innovative capacity, while still good, received slightly lower grades. Increasing hostility towards science has not left the academic sector unscathed: Appreciation by society is reported to be lacking by many respondents.