

Concept: Career Paths after the Doctorate

Status: June 2026

Objective

TU Dortmund University aims to provide reliable career pathways both within and outside academia, to sustainably support excellent early career researchers, and to create attractive opportunities for professional development. The *Research Strategy 2023–2027*, the *Concept for the promotion of scientists in early career phases at TU Dortmund University*, and the *Concept for Permanent Academic Positions at TU Dortmund University* have laid the foundation for a comprehensive framework for career development.

Building on these initiatives, TU Dortmund University is further refining its support measures for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) through the **Career Paths after the Doctorate** concept. The overarching framework was jointly developed with Ruhr University Bochum as part of the **Ruhr Innovation Lab (RIL)**. Its objective is to provide ECRs with orientation, career development opportunities, and planning security for a range of academic and non-academic career goals through a **transparent qualification framework that is internationally compatible**. At the same time, the concept aims to further strengthen TU Dortmund University's attractiveness in the national and international competition for academic talent. The framework is designed to systematically support individual career development. It integrates **talent development, staff development, and strategic career planning** into a coherent framework for academic careers and commits the University to maintaining clearly defined **standards** for the supervision and support of ECRs across all career pathways.

Career Phases

TU Dortmund University follows internationally established career levels and adopts the European research career framework:

- Doctoral Researcher (R1)
- Recognised Researcher (R2)
- Established Researcher (R3)
- Leading Researcher (R4)

This classification provides transparency regarding qualification levels, competencies, and career development opportunities while facilitating international comparability of academic career paths. At TU Dortmund University, permanent employment is generally achieved no later than the Leading Researcher (R4) stage.

Guiding Principles

Early Academic Independence: TU Dortmund University promotes academic independence at the earliest possible stage. By the transition to the Established Researcher (R3) stage at the latest, researchers should have developed and demonstrated an independent academic profile.

Individual Career Design: Academic career requirements differ considerably across disciplines. Accordingly, the framework is based on a flexible modular system that accommodates discipline-specific components such as international mobility, periods of work outside academia, habilitation, structured qualification programs, and leadership training.

Continuous Support and Feedback: All researchers have access to mentoring, coaching, and career counselling. Initial meetings, regular development discussions, including qualification agreements and career counselling, as well as structured mid-term and final evaluations based on transparent assessment criteria support individual career planning. The model discussion guides for regular meetings and annual reviews between supervisors and postdoctoral researchers, developed in 2025, may be used for this purpose.

Flexible Career Pathways: Career paths are not regarded as rigid tracks. Movement between different career pathways, entry at later career stages, and flexibility regarding the duration of individual career phases should generally be possible, provided that the relevant academic qualifications have been achieved. This approach accommodates individual career trajectories and enhances the flexibility of academic careers.

Equal Opportunities and Diversity: The concept is closely aligned with TU Dortmund University's objectives regarding gender equality and diversity.

Career Paths After the Doctorate

Until completion of the doctorate, all researchers pass through a common qualification phase (**R1**). After earning a doctoral degree, a range of career paths becomes available, reflecting different academic profiles and professional aspirations.

The qualification framework recognizes and comprehensively supports **three overarching career goals** on an equal footing:

- **Professorships,**
- **Permanent academic positions alongside the professorship,**
- **Positions in the public or private sector.**

The balance between responsibilities, qualification requirements, and evaluation criteria varies across career paths and their respective phases. Key areas of focus for an academic career include:

- **Research**, with an emphasis on the independent development and conduct of research projects,
- **Teaching**, with a focus on excellence in higher education teaching, curriculum development, and teaching innovation,
- **Academic management**, with a focus on research support, academic governance, and strategic institutional responsibilities.

These three areas also constitute the distinct profiles of permanent academic positions alongside the professorship. They make an indispensable contribution to the university's performance and are recognized as equally valuable career perspectives.

The **postdoctoral phase (R2)** serves to develop an individual's **academic profile** and prepare for a **subsequent career decision**. During this phase, the **foundations are established for transitioning** into either a **structurally independent** or a **structurally integrated** career path.

Researchers are supported in developing an individual career profile through mentoring, career counseling, mobility opportunities, and professional development measures. Key elements include deepening disciplinary expertise, building national and international networks, and developing an independent research profile.

To foster academic networking, a mobility window should be provided for visiting appointments, research stays, or sabbaticals. The duration and design of these opportunities should be tailored to disciplinary requirements and the conditions of relevant funding programs.

TU Dortmund University supports this phase through the Graduate Center, the Research Academy, and other academic staff development units.

The **six position profiles** presented below differ in terms of the degree of academic independence, leadership and resource responsibilities, and thematic focus. They are, however, designed as equally valued career options (see Fig. 1).

Structurally Independent Career Paths (R3 on the Path to R4)

These career paths are characterized by a high degree of academic independence, responsibility for resources, and the development of an independent research profile. To strengthen early structural independence, the university aims for a minimum proportion of researchers in career paths 1–3 equivalent to 30% of the number of university professors.

(1) Junior Professor with Tenure Track

- Independent budget and personnel responsibility
- General right to supervise doctoral candidates
- Independent development of a research and teaching profile

(2) Junior Professor without Tenure Track

- Independent budget and personnel responsibility
- General right to supervise doctoral candidates
- Independent development of a research and teaching profile
- Opportunity to transition into a permanent academic position within existing career pathways at TU Dortmund
- Accompanying career counseling regarding career opportunities both within and outside the university

(3) Junior Research Group Leader / Individual Research Scholar

- Independent budget and personnel responsibility
- Independent acquisition and management of third-party funded research projects
- Right to supervise doctoral candidates within self-acquired externally funded projects or projects in which the researcher has made a substantial contribution
- Lower teaching load than assistant professorships
- Organizational affiliation with an institute or dean's office
- Optional integration into existing research groups in the sense of "connected independence"

Evaluation of career paths 1–3 is based primarily on research achievements, success in acquiring external funding, publication record, and performance in teaching and knowledge transfer. In addition, discipline-specific qualifications and achievements may be considered. Departments are responsible for specifying the evaluation criteria in accordance with their disciplinary cultures while adhering to the principles of transparent research assessment. A transition period of one year is provided for implementation.

Structurally Integrated Career Paths

These career paths enable academic careers with different areas of emphasis within the university's existing organizational structures.

(4) Researchers make independent scholarly contributions within research groups, collaborative research initiatives, or academic institutions.

- Organizational affiliation with a professorship
- Opportunity to independently acquire and administer third-party funding
- Right to supervise doctoral candidates within self-acquired externally funded projects
- Evaluation based primarily on publications, contributions to research projects, teaching, and knowledge transfer

(5) Lecturers focus primarily on teaching, curriculum development, and teaching innovation.

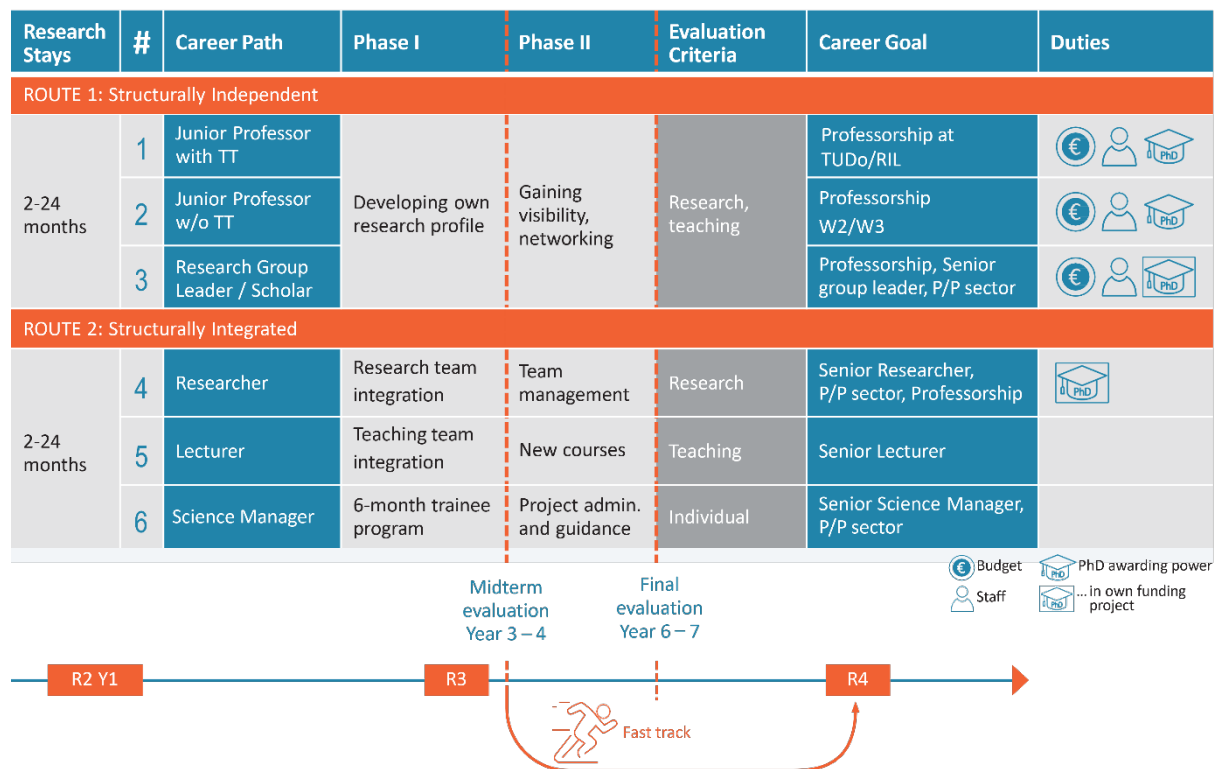
- Organizational affiliation with professorships
- Focus on excellence in teaching and the further development of teaching concepts
- Opportunity to engage in research within the scope of the individual position profile
- Evaluation based primarily on teaching performance, complemented by scholarly and knowledge transfer activities

(6) Academic Manager / Science Manager research support and academic governance functions in administration, research funding, and university development.

- Organizational affiliation with professorships, dean's offices, and related units
- Responsibilities may include research funding, research data management, science communication, knowledge transfer, or university administration
- Trainee program at the beginning of employment (up to six months)
- Evaluation based on professional qualifications, relevant continuing education, project performance, and supervisory assessment
- Opportunity to engage in scholarly activities within the scope of the individual position profile

A transition period of one year, until June 2027, is established to ensure the clear assignment of ECRs in fixed-term qualification positions to the new career profiles. For permanent positions, alignment shall take place no later than the next appointment to the position, based on the university's permanent positions framework.

Figure 1. Career Paths After the Doctorate



Note: As a general principle, the overall career timeline should be maintained. However, the duration of individual career phases and consequently the timing of evaluations may vary depending on individual circumstances.