

I love being a researcher, but...

Summary in English: Member survey on the
academic staff's perception of everyday working life
and the academic career



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Appendix

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For many, being a researcher is the dream job. Both young and more established researchers and academics emphasize the many positive aspects of their work. They point to professional freedom and flexibility, internal motivation, chances of professional collaboration and the opportunity to develop themselves, their field, and their students. Contributing to moving research forward, teaching, and meeting the ever-changing needs for knowledge is simply experienced as meaningful and important.

However, several studies provide grounds for questioning the attractiveness of the research profession. Many young researchers do not recommend research as a career path. The high level of non-permanent positions makes future prospects uncertain, and salary level and working conditions are not considered sufficient. Many experience a never-ending chase for funding in order to continue their research. Heavy workloads, high degree of individual responsibility, too few resources, and lack of support and financial security are frequent themes when discussing the research profession.

This duality is confirmed in the new survey among the members of Forskerforbundet (The Norwegian Association of Researchers), presented in this report. Many of the respondents express that they love their job, but there are many "but..."s. Our findings confirm that the working conditions for researchers have deteriorated in recent years. The research profession is losing ground and is gradually considered less attractive. We are particularly alarmed by the finding that only 20 percent of the postdocs would recommend a career in research, and that one in three academics in permanent positions consider quitting and leave academia. Among temporary employees, there is a large proportion who want to continue working in academia, but only a small proportion consider the chances of getting a permanent job to be good.

The precarity of research careers is met with increased attention and concern both nationally and internationally. It has severe consequences for the individual researcher, but also affect the quality of research and higher education. In 2021, the Norwegian government presented a strategy for recruitment of, and career development for, researchers. OECD highlighted the temporary nature and uncertainty of the profession in the report "Reducing the precarity in academic research careers" in 2021. The EU is currently developing a framework for research careers - inside and outside of academia.

In the autumn of 2021, Forskerforbundet launched "Forskermeldingen", a report on the status of the research profession and researchers' everyday work life. The report pointed to several challenges within the current research system. This member survey expands on the topics brought up in that report. With the survey, we wanted to know more about the attractiveness of the research career, as seen from researchers and academics who are in various stages of their career in academia. Researchers and academics are in this context employees who (1) do research and development (R&D), either full time or as part of their job, or (2) have a relevant leadership position in academia. Academia is here defined as universities and colleges, research institutes and university hospitals. We asked:

- How satisfied are the respondents with their jobs?
- What are they satisfied and dissatisfied with?
- Do they experience their profession and competence to be attractive?
- Would they recommend a career in academia to young people today?
- Are they considering quitting and leaving academia? If so, why, and why do others want to stay and continue their career?

There is a broad agreement about the importance of research. In the long-term strategic plan for research and higher education, the government notes that societal challenges have become more acute, and that research and higher education is more important than ever before (Meld. St. 5 (2022-2023)). This means that the attractiveness of the profession becomes more important as well, and this report presents some of the challenges that authorities, institutions and researchers' organisations need to solve together.

Summary

Some main findings:

- Only 1 in 3 young researchers, and only 1 in 5 postdocs, would recommend a career in academia to other young people
- 1 in 3 permanent employees consider leaving academia
- Only 1 in 10 temporary employees consider their chances of getting a permanent position in academia relatively good
- Female respondents, far more frequently than male respondents, point to work pressure as an important reason for leaving academia

Percentage satisfied / very satisfied	All respondents	Temporary position	Non-Norwegian	Teaching position
General wellbeing	69 %	64 %	62 %	54 %
Salary	38 %	34 %	40 %	21 %
Working conditions	60 %	58 %	59 %	45 %
Work tasks	69 %	73 %	64 %	53 %
Professional community	62 %	62 %	55 %	52 %
Development of academic career up until today	56 %	53 %	54 %	30 %
Future prospects for development of academic career	46 %	31 %	41 %	31 %

The research profession is perceived as quite attractive with a moderately high status

The majority of the respondents say that a career in research is attractive. 60 percent somewhat or fully agree, with younger researchers and temporary employees being the least likely to agree. Over 30 percent of the temporary employed and 35 percent of the postdocs fully or somewhat disagree that a career in research is attractive.

In addition, 58 percent of the respondents agree somewhat or fully with the statement that the status of the researcher profession is generally high. Less than 20 percent fully or somewhat disagree, with some minor differences between groups based on type of employment. As a group, non-Norwegian respondents agree the least with the statement.

The respondents are quite satisfied, but not with everything

The majority of respondents, 69 percent, are satisfied or very satisfied with their job. However, this is not a high number when compared to other surveys on general job satisfaction. Researchers are most satisfied with the work tasks and their professional community, and least satisfied with their salary. The temporary employed, non-Norwegians and employees who are primarily in teaching positions are overall least satisfied with different aspects of their work. Another tendency is that the young respondents at state universities and at health institutions are less satisfied than the overall average when it comes to several aspects of their work.

25 percent of all respondents, and 40 percent of the temporary employed, are dissatisfied with their career prospects.

A minority would recommend a scientific career

Although the respondents state that a career in research is attractive and has a certain status, there is a large proportion who are reluctant to recommend a career in research. Only 38 percent say that they would recommend a research career in general, while 32 percent say that they would not. Among the younger respondents and temporary employees there are more respondents who would not recommend a career in research than there are who would. Those who have completed research training, but still have not got a permanent job, like the postdocs, are most reluctant – only 20% of postdocs would recommend a career in research. This is a negative development from previous studies and gives cause for concern.

When the question concerns whether the respondents would recommend a career in their own professional field, less than half (44%) of them say they would do so. Again, a higher percentage of the temporary employees would not recommend a career in their own professional field (37%) than those who would (33%). Among employees in the field of technology there is a clear majority (63 %) who would recommend a career in their field, whereas employees in the humanities and art sciences are split down the middle.

Uncertainty about attractiveness in labour market

A higher percentage of respondents agree (44 %) than disagree (32 %) with the statement that it is easy to get an alternative job. Still, this means that 1 in 3 respondents say that it is difficult to find other jobs. Academic staff in the humanities, non-Norwegians and temporary employees experience the most challenges in this regard. Many say that they feel over-qualified or too specialized for other jobs.

The respondents are more confident when it comes to questions about their competence being in demand outside of academia, with half of the respondents stating that it is. Again, the percentage is lower among those who are temporary employed and among academic staff in humanities and the art sciences, while it is higher among respondents in the field of technology. Around 60 % say that the work they do is valued by society. The percentage is highest among researchers in the fields of mathematics and natural sciences, and respondents who do commissioned research.

1 in 3 respondents consider leaving academia

33 % of respondents in permanent positions say that they have applied for jobs outside academia or consider a change of career. Among those who are 40 years or younger, and in a permanent position, 42 % are in the mood for a career change. The respondents who mostly work with teaching or primarily do research are those who to the largest degree wish to leave. There is reason to believe that these numbers are relatively high.

Main reasons from most to least important (score from 1-3).

Reason	Score
Work pressure	1,75
Salary	1,86
Opportunities for furthering my career	1,88
Need of change	1,97
Not satisfied with work tasks	2,02
Work environment	2,06
Personal / private reasons	2,20
Insecurities regarding future funding and work	2,24
Lack of academic freedom	2,35

71 % of employees in temporary positions wish to stay in academia (17 % say they do not want to), but few believe that they will be able to. Only 11 % say that they find their chances of getting a permanent/secure position to be relatively good. Respondents who are primarily working with research are the least confident in their chances: 80 % say that they want to stay in academia, but only 7 % say that they consider their chances of getting a permanent/secure position to be relatively good.

Uncertainty in future work and funding and work pressure are the main reasons why the respondents want to leave. The respondents in temporary positions who are either uncertain or want to leave academia provide the following reasons, ranked from most to least important (score 1-3):

Reason	Score
Insecurities regarding future funding and work	1,27
Work pressure	1,61
Salary	1,76
Opportunities for furthering my career	1,79
Work environment	1,97
Need of change	2,10
Not satisfied with work tasks	2,17
Personal / private reasons	2,23
Lack of academic freedom	2,43

Those who stay, do so because of professional freedom and personal motivation

The majority of the respondents wish to stay in academia. They state the following reasons, ranked from most to least important (score 1-3; important = 1, not important = 3)

Reason	Score
Academic freedom	1,12
I am passionate about my field	1,21
Work tasks	1,26
Job security	1,45
Work environment	1,50
Opportunities for furthering my career	1,68
Salary	2,10
Lack of other career opportunities	2,39

Summary of free text answers

More than 1,900 replies were written in the three free text fields of the survey. This is a unique material for insight into the ways in which many of our members perceive their work situation. In this report we use these answers to illustrate various topics, but also to substantiate and supplement the quantitative results. From the quantitative material we see that many respondents are satisfied, and it is to be expected that these are less motivated to leave comments than those who for various reasons are more dissatisfied. Many people use the opportunity to express dissatisfaction with everything from salaries and managers to lack of time and resources for research and development (R&D). Furthermore, the respondents use the opportunity to explain and elaborate on their answers, or to address something that is not covered by the survey's questions and answers. In this summary, we will highlight a few themes that repeats themselves across the free text answers.

Salary and salary development

Salary is mentioned about 800 times in the free text answers, and almost never in a positive way. Many are dissatisfied with their salary and the salary development over time, and this applies especially to respondents at state universities and colleges. Many compare their salaries to other fields, especially the private sector, and estimate that they could earn much more if they had worked outside of academia. Others are unhappy with their salary when compared to their colleagues at the same institution, and some think that the salary level for researchers in Norwegian academia is generally low compared to other countries.

The respondents especially emphasize that the salary level does not match the responsibilities, their competence, and the amount of work. They do not feel appreciated, which leads to frustration. Some also say that they will leave academia because of the low salary, and many express a reluctance to recommend a career in academia because of the low pay.

In a survey of PhDs from 2019, a large proportion of the respondents turned down a career in academia due to the salary level. It is, therefore, likely that academia is missing out on talented researchers. The written comments also show that being unsatisfied with your pay can lead to less job satisfaction, which in turn can affect the motivation and work environment negatively.

Workload and work hours

There is a three-digit number of comments about work pressure, workload, and a lack of work/life-balance. The topic is frequently brought up by employees at universities and university colleges who describe a situation in which the work tasks cannot be resolved within the normal working hours. Many describe a feeling of individual and personal responsibility for the various tasks. They say that the administrative support functions have been reduced and that management follow-up is lacking. Moreover, there are several respondents who point out that the extra work is not compensated in any way. Many therefore say that they are, or fear to be, burnt out, and that the job affects their family and social life. The temporary employees feel obliged to take on extra tasks, while also fearing that they will not be able to do enough qualifying work to get a new position.

Both quantitative and qualitative research clearly shows that it is difficult, especially for employees at the universities and university colleges, to finish their workload within the normal working day (see more in chap. 6.2). It also appears from the comments that many considers it necessary to do a significant amount of unpaid overtime work to even be considered to get a permanent job, promotion, salary development or to be in a position that allows you to gain the necessary research funds and professional influence. It is known that extra work and work pressure can lead to physical and mental health problems, and we see that it makes the research profession less attractive for the academics.

Temporary positions and job security

Around 200 comments are related to temporary positions and uncertainty regarding future career. This is frequently brought up by employees in the public sector, at health institutions, state-owned research institutes, and universities. Many are concerned about their situation or worried about their own career going forward, but there is also a large number of the well-established respondents who are worried over this development and are reluctant to recommend a career in research because of the current work conditions.

The challenges brought up in the answers are not only about temporary employment, but also relates to uncertainty regarding funding for researchers who are permanently employed. Several of the English-speaking respondents are surprised and disappointed that the funding is not better in Norway than in other countries or parts of the world that they know. Many of them express great frustration about future prospects and the conditions of basic research. There are also some respondents without a PhD who describes a situation in which they are qualified to teach, to be responsible for subjects and to follow up students year after year, but who do not see any chance of getting permanent employment without a PhD.

The high number of temporary positions in higher education, the health sector and at some of the public research institutes has gained political attention. Still, no larger changes have taken place the last years. The proportion of temporary employees in regular positions is reduced (from around 20% to around 16%), but the proportion of fixed-term employees has increased accordingly. The proportion of temporary employees among the academic staff at state universities and university colleges have remained stable at approximately 45 % in recent years. Excluding the PhD positions, about 25 % of the academic staff in public higher education are temporary employed. At some state-owned research institutes and health institutions the percentage of temporary employed researchers is even higher. Many respondents describe long periods of temporary employments and how this affects future prospects, motivation, and research quality. This supports the claim that this is a problem both for the individual researcher and research in general.

How attractive is a career in research?

Those who do not recommend a career in research or do not find it attractive are overrepresented among the respondents leaving a written reply, often because of the reasons discussed above: salaries, workload, and unpredictability. Thus, the qualitative answers and the quantitative data do not fully match, as the free comments are generally more negative. Still, many respondents write that a career in research is attractive, and say that they can recommend it, but only if you are motivated and prepared to sacrifice other aspects of your life for your career.

NIFU's report «Attraktive akademiske karrierer (2019:10)» approaches the question differently, with a special emphasis on critical transitions in the research career. NIFU explores data on applications to academic positions, mobility, and promotion. They conclude that academic careers are attractive since the number of applicants usually is quite high and that there is little external mobility. But here too it appears that there are variations between fields and challenges with recruiting Norwegians to academic positions in several areas. We also see a significantly increased proportion of non-Norwegians in research positions, and today, every third employee in an academic position in higher education is an "immigrant," according to Indikatorrapporten. Neither the quantitative nor the qualitative material of this survey suggests, however, that they are more satisfied than Norwegians, or that Norwegian workers are more or less demanding. Rather, the data shows that non-Norwegian are less satisfied and that they view the research career both as less attractive and recommendable than the Norwegian respondents. We can also read from the comments that some non-Norwegians feel a bit disappointed, as they had higher expectations of salary development, job security, professional community, and general resources in Norway.

Are the respondents unduly worried?

Some respondents emphasize that it is only within academia that they can conduct free research in their field. For them it is therefore a question of whether there are any realistic alternatives. Some of the written responses also indicate concern about whether their own competence is in demand outside of academia, especially among the well-established respondents that are approaching retirement age, who say that they do not think that they are attractive in the job market outside of academia. A portion of this group also states that it is out of the question to start over in a new job when one is approaching retirement.

This may not be so strange, but what about everyone who are in a different career phase or in a recruitment position? Does academia create a culture in which people are blind to their own potential, both within academia and in other professions? One of the respondents put it this way:

We pull each other down. I am responsible for several postdocs, and they greatly underestimate their own competence. It is great that Forskerforbundet fights for academic rights, but we also need to make young talented researchers realize all the great and cool things with working in this sector. We need to watch out so that we don't create a culture of constant complaining.

It might be that the written responses have been used to vent frustration and considering the fact that so many of the temporary employed wish to stay, and that so few permanently employed actually quit, we find that the research profession is mostly viewed as attractive. There are some who write that they have tried working outside of academia but returned as they missed the tasks and the freedom. Nevertheless, it is not our impression that the respondents leaving comments are whining, or unable to adapt to other fields. Actually, a good number of the respondents explain that they think the research they conduct or the subject they teach is so important to society, that they do not want to give it up. Others explain that they have applied for work outside of academia, but without getting a job. As we can see from Indikatorrapporten, there is a low share of doctoral degrees among researchers in the private industry sector, which may indicate that R&D activities in the sector rarely requires and demands the specialist competence that PhDs possess. It could also be that researchers in academia rarely show or explain their skills and relevance to the industry – a point that is brought up in several free text answers.

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