

... navigate the German academic system?



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Dr Neela Enke holds a doctorate in Biology and has over 10 years experience as a researcher and team leader in several European research institutions. She is a coach for research and administrative staff, professors, team leaders and teams.

There is not the one perfect way to navigate the German academic system towards the university professorship (alternatives are a topic for another time), but different options with different pros and cons. Regardless which path or paths you choose (they are not mutually exclusive), it's the same ingredients you need to put into your “professorship cake”:

- 1) **A strong scientific profile** that shows that you are an independent researcher in your own right. This can be shaped by the projects you do and – of course – your publications and conference appearances.
- 2) **Experience in teaching**, ideally with some variety regarding the topic (specialized versus basic), formats (e.g., lectures, courses, seminars, excursions...) and target groups (e. g. bachelor or master students).
- 3) **Third party funding**, best demonstrated through projects that you have acquired by yourself.
- 4) **Networks**, partly as source of information of what is going on in your field and partly as “selling point” for your new employer, who might gain access to new areas through your network.

As a trainer she offers workshops on career development in research, leadership, as well as diversity and conflict management. She is a trained mediator with a focus on conflicts in research organisations.

5) **Committee work** as universities are self-administrated organizations, joining boards, will help you a) to demonstrate your committee skills and b) to gain necessary insights into the field of micro-politics.

6) **Professorability** is a mixture of habitus and qualifications, basically you have to figure out who you are going to be as a professor.

So, now that you know which ingredients to collect, we will have a look at the different options you have to increase your academic independence:

The habilitation

Until the early 2000s the habilitation was a legal requirement to be eligible for a professorship. Since then, the system became more flexible, and you can gather achievements considered equivalent to a habilitation (habilitationsäquivalente Leistungen). The habilitation is regulated in the “Habilitationsordnung”, which differs depending on the faculty, the federal state, and the field of research. Usually there is a postdoctoral thesis (either as monograph or cumulative work), a public lecture and/or presentation. There is often also a certain amount of teaching experience required.

The relevance of a habilitation varies across disciplines: in the more “traditionally” oriented fields (e.g. literature, law, theology, medicine) it is often still expected, whereas in other fields (e.g. engineering, life sciences) it is not needed anymore. Ideally, the habilitation helps you to build your own, independent research profile. However, some see it

as an antiquated tradition and depending on with which mentor you do your habilitation with, it might not provide you with enough overall independence.

For internationals it might be strategically attractive to do a habilitation to demonstrate their alliance to the German system. For researchers who have an interdisciplinary background and have difficulties to build a profile that is targeted enough to the mostly disciplinary professorships in Germany it can make sense to do a habilitation to align themselves with a certain field.

The Junior Professorship (W1)

The Junior Professorship is aimed at early state postdocs (2 – 6 years after the PhD) and has been “invented” as an alternative to the habilitation. It lasts six years, and after three years there is a mid-term-evaluation. If you pass it, you are seen as eligible for other, permanent professorships (= habilitationsäquivalent). The pros of the W1 are that you are independent quite early on, you cross into rank and title of a professor early, and you are assigned to a committee that gives you feedback in terms of your professional development.

Furthermore, you have the opportunity to teach and to sit on committees. The downside is, that you have to teach 6 SWS and to join committees which is time you can’t spend working on your scientific profile. Also, the W1 often has not a lot of resources attached to it (however, this can vary).

The Junior Research Group

If you manage to secure the major grant that a junior group represents (e.g., Emmy Noether grant or to some extent an ERC), that is a big pro for your academic career! You can do research very comfortably and with a good output, assemble a team of your own choice and you may teach but you do not have to. Depending on the grant and your host institution there is a good chance to get the right to formally supervise PhD candidates, usually a privilege connected to the status of professorship. The challenges you might face are that you have to become a team leader early on in your career and you might be a “free radical” in your institution without a clear association to anyone which might make it difficult for you to gather knowledge about organizational politics.

Explainer: Tenure Track

There are junior professorships with or without a tenure track. The latter means that after a positive evaluation at the end of your junior professorship you are elevated to a W2 permanent professorship. While junior professors without tenure track have sometimes difficulties to get onto a W2 or W3 professorship (e.g., because other scholars can publish more), the tenure track junior professorship offer a very plannable career path. However, to make things more complicated, there are tenure track options and real tenure tracks. The devil is in the fine print: Whereas with a tenure track option, the university can put you on a permanent position (but doesn't have to), with a real tenure track you have a legal right to be advanced to permanency in case of a positive evaluation. Usually, you have a W1 to W2 tenure track, but sometimes you will find W2 to W3 tenure tracks.

Explainer: W-System

The W-System is the system after which professors get their salary. W1 is allocated to junior professorships, thus, the lowest class of professors. The differences between W2 and W3 are somewhat fuzzy but the W3

often has more personnel and resources and is considered more senior, often the head of an institute. The W-salary for W2 and W3 consists of a basic amount plus performance-oriented additions that need to be negotiated. For the W1 professorship this is only true in some federal states.

Point of interest: The higher the rank of professorship, the lower the percentage of female professors.

Last but not least...the other way

You can choose none of the above pathways and still become a professor. You need to use your postdoc phase strategically to collect all the ingredients for the “professorship cake”. The biggest challenges here are often independency and teaching. Acquiring your own funds can help with demonstrating your independency. In regard to teaching, it can be either that you have no easy access to give lectures or that you have to teach so much, that you neglect all the other stuff on your list.

If you have topics for the „how to“ section we have not yet touched, please email to jGfV@GfV.org.