

# VfS Workshop for early career researchers on “Careers outside Academia: Ministries, government institutions and think tanks”

**Workshop date & location: September 15, 2024, Annual Meeting of the VfS @TU Berlin**

The VfS has a long tradition of and strong commitment to promoting the careers of young researchers. This workshop aims to provide information about career opportunities outside of universities, where economists face a rich set of possible employments. Leveraging this year’s conference location in Berlin, this workshop focuses on a subset of potential employers: ministries and other governmental organizations. Together with selected experts, the workshop participants will identify the most important questions and answers about career paths at these employers. The format is interactive and all participants are expected to make oral and written contributions before, during and after the VfS meeting.

Target Audience:      Doctoral students, post-docs, and junior professors

Organised by:          Florian Englmaier (LMU Munich) & Georg Weizsäcker (HU Berlin)

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# Working group 1: BEFORE ENTRY

Lead question: How should I build my career and my human capital, to be competitive?

## Summary

This working group discussed strategies for building a competitive career in ministries, government institutions and think tanks, focusing on human capital development and career planning.

- **Educational Background:** While a Ph.D. is not required for all institutions, a strong quantitative background with proficiency in statistical software like Stata, R, or Python is often highly valued. Expertise and institutional knowledge about the institution's relevant area of activities topics are also relevant. In research-oriented institutes, experience in data analysis is relevant, too.
- **Skill Development:** Policy advisory skills, including the ability to communicate research findings effectively to non-researchers and write clear reports, are essential. Participants are encouraged to seek out writing courses and practice explaining their research to diverse audiences. Internships at public sector institutes can provide valuable experience and insights into policy advisory work.
- **Timing of Entry:** Entry points vary depending on the specific institution and position. Some institutions recruit through the job market, while others may have project-based openings throughout the year. Ministries often hire generalists and may not prioritize specific thesis topics, while some institutes favor candidates with research aligned with their focus areas.
- **Application Process:** The application process differs across institutions. Generally, it involves submitting a CV, cover letter, and potentially a research sample. Some ministries may also require assessment centers, interviews, and language tests. Networking and informational interviews are crucial for gaining insights into specific institutions and positions.
- **Language Skills:** Proficiency in German is often required for positions in German ministries, as precise wording is crucial in legal texts and policy documents. English proficiency is also important, especially for international organizations and think tanks.
- **Career Planning:** It's important to have a contingency plan in case an academic career doesn't materialize. Be aware of age limits for civil servant positions and consider alternative career paths early on.
- **Additional Considerations:** Grades are generally less important than a good research profile and relevant skills. Political party affiliation is generally not a major factor in the hiring process for most public sector positions.

# Working group 2: AT ENTRY

Lead question: How does the application process work – how do I get in?

## Summary

This working group focused on the practicalities of the application process, including prerequisites, selection criteria, and interview preparation.

- **Prerequisites:** Requirements vary depending on the position and institution. While a Ph.D. can be beneficial, quantitative and communication skills are always important. Familiarity with relevant software and data analysis tools is often expected. German language proficiency is typically required for positions in German ministries. (See also previous page, Working group 1.)
- **Selection Criteria:** The selection process considers the overall candidate profile, including research experience, publications, technical skills, and soft skills. Assessment centers, interviews, and written exercises are common components of the application process. Networking and demonstrating genuine interest in the institution's work can be advantageous.
- **Preparation:** Thoroughly research the target institution and position. Tailor your application materials to highlight relevant skills and experiences. Practice potential interview questions and be prepared to discuss your research in a clear and concise manner. Seek feedback from peers and mentors on your application materials and interview skills.
- **Salary Negotiation:** Salary negotiation may be limited in public sector positions, where pay scales are often predetermined. However, "Erfahrungsstufen" may vary and there may be discretion on whether those are granted. Do some research on the typical salaries for similar positions and be prepared to discuss your expectations.
- **Networking:** Building at least some relationships with people in your desired field and institution is crucial at many stages and in particular at the application stage. Attend conferences, workshops, and seminars to meet potential employers and colleagues. Utilize online platforms like LinkedIn and alumni networks to connect with people in your field.

# Working group 3: POST ENTRY

Lead question: What can I expect once inside, and what are the long-term career prospects?

## Summary

This working group discussed the typical experiences and career trajectories within the public sector, particularly in German ministries.

- **Typical Age at Entry:** The typical age at entry varies depending on the level of education and experience, but it generally falls between 25 and 35.
- **Career Progression:** In ministries, the entry-level is typically at the "Referat" level, where you work on specific policy topics. Career progression involves horizontal and vertical moves within the ministry, with opportunities to switch departments and take on increasing responsibilities. Promotion to "Referatsleiter" (head of a department) is a significant step, comparable to a postdoc to professor transition in academia. Only a relatively small share makes it to "Referatsleiter", however. Further promotions are even less common.
- **Day-to-Day Tasks:** The work is fast-paced, with tight deadlines and a focus on practical policy implementation. Tasks include preparing policy proposals, briefing materials, and answering questions from decision-makers and parliamentarians. While research is not a primary focus, staying informed about relevant literature and data analysis can be valuable. Active use of sophisticated software tools is rare in ministries, however. It is much more common in think tanks and other research-oriented institutions.
- **Work-Life Balance:** Public sector jobs generally offer good work-life balance and job security, with generous pension and insurance benefits. However, the fast-paced nature of the work can be demanding, and some individuals miss the intellectual freedom of academia.
- **Mobility:** There are opportunities for mobility within and across ministries, as well as secondment opportunities to international organizations. However, switching ministries may involve temporary demotions in salary and rank.

# Participants

## Members working group 1

Expert: Stefanie Wolter (IAB)

Coordinator: Michel Tolksdorf

Members: Albina Latifi, Andrea Lagoda, Antonia Hohmann, Armin Bolouri, Charlotte Plinke, Diana Zarbailova, Eduard Storm, Elena Ziege, Francesca Verga, Hande Erkut, Immanuel Feld, Julia Schmidtke, Lars Winkelmann, Lennard Schlattmann, Lukas Wilzek, Manuel Linsenmeier, Manuel Pannier, Marcus Biermann, Niklas Taft, Roxanne Raabe, Rudolf Faininger, Sebastian Riedmiller, Sokol Tominaj, Tim Finn Hainbach, Ülkü Bıçakçı, Valentin Lindlacher, Valentin Wett, Winnie Coleman, Yana Radeva

## Members working group 2

Expert: Vera Zipperer (Federal Chancellery)

Coordinators: Alexander Moog & Lisa Timm

Members: Ali Kashefi, Andreas Vortisch, Christopher Gardiner, Felix Klapper, Kamal Kassam, Luzie Thiel, Matthias Hänsel, Niklas Hübner, Solveig Ahorner

## Members working group 3

Expert: Philipp Albert (BMWK)

Coordinators: Yasemin Özdemir & Gloria Hauschka

Members: Alina Imping, Alisa Frey, Christoph Sommer, Daniela Rroshi, Egshiglen Batbayar, Gero Stiepelmann, Gloria Hauschka, Julia Baumann, Katharina Bettig, Katharina Kolb, Leon Stolle, Luca Preller, Mahdi Gholami, Malin Mahlbacher, Marius Cziriak, Melanie Schmid, Miguel Abellán, Samuel Fahim, Sarah Frohnweiler, Sonja Dobkowitz, Till Armbruster, Tobias Stäbler, Viola Garstenauer, Viola Hilbert, Ximeng Fang, Yasemin Özdemir, Yero Ndiaye