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Postdoctoral life scientists and supervision work in the contemporary university : a case study of changes in the cultural norms of science / Ruth Müller

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which postdoctoral life scientists engage in supervision work in academic institutions in Austria. Reward systems and career conditions in academic institutions in most European and other OECD countries have changed significantly during the last two decades. While an increasing focus is put on evaluating research performances, little reward is attached to excellent performances in mentoring and advising students. Postdoctoral scientists mostly inhabit fragile institutional positions and experience harsh competition, as the number of available senior positions is small compared to that of young scientists striving for an academic career. To prevail in this competition, publications and mobility are key. Educational work is rarely rewarded. Nevertheless, postdocs play a key role in educating PhD students, as overburdened senior scientists often pass on practical supervision duties to their postdoctoral fellows. This paper shows how under these conditions, postdocs reframe the students they supervise as potential resources for co-authored publications. What might look like a mutually beneficial solution at a first glance, in practice implies

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the subordination of the values of education to the logic of production, which marginalizes spaces primarily devoted to education. The author argues that conflicts like this are indicative of broader changes in the cultural norms of science and academic citizenship, rendering community-oriented tasks such as education work less attractive to academic scientists. Since education and supervision work are central cornerstones of any functioning higher education and research system, this could have negative repercussions for the long-term development of academic institutions. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)