Investigation of Causes and Potential Solutions to Work-Related Stress Among Assistant Professors at the Department of Biology, Aarhus University

Background

This project was developed by the Working Group on Work-Related Stress under the local Occupational Health and Safety Committee. The group consisted of Anne Blach Overgaard, Susanne Nielsen, Emilia D. Hansen, and Hans Brix.

In this study, all assistant professors at the Department of Biology were invited to engage in a dialogue about their perceptions of the causes of work-related stress and their ideas for potential solutions.

The dialogues were conducted by Emilia D. Hansen. These were not recorded, but Emilia took notes that were transcribed into a digital document. To ensure consent for storing the notes, Emilia asked the assistant professors to sign a consent form.

After conducting the dialogues, Emilia analyzed the notes and summarized the key themes in this report. The observations and quotes from the assistant professors have been anonymized.

A total of 12 assistant professors, including 7 Tenure Track (TT) and 5 fixed-term, participated in the study.

Method

Methodologically, Emilia focused on identifying and emphasizing the themes that were commonly mentioned as concerns by most participants, which are presented in the "Key Causes" section. In the "Themes" section, additional issues are included if more than one participant described them as a source of pressure.

Purpose of the Study

The Working Group on Work-Related Stress will use the report to propose targeted initiatives for reducing stress among assistant professors. These will be presented at an Occupational Health and Safety Committee meeting."

Structure of the Report

The report is organized into the following chapters:

- **Key Causes of Work-Related Stress Among Fixed-Term and Tenure Track (TT) Assistant Professors**: This chapter identifies the primary stressors impacting assistant professors, providing a foundation for understanding the challenges they face.

- **Themes**: This chapter delves deeper into recurring issues raised during the dialogues, offering a more detailed view of the underlying problems.
- **Recommendations**: This chapter offers solutions grounded in the analysis of stressors and aligned with the suggestions shared by the assistant professors.

Key Causes of Stress Among Fixed-Term and Tenure Track (TT) Assistant Professors

This chapter summarizes the most significant causes of stress for both groups of assistant professors. Many of these factors will be explored further in the next section, "Themes."

Shared Challenges Across Both Groups

Almost everyone describes their 30s as a high-pressure period where 'everything happens.' They are building families, starting careers, their partners are starting their careers, and they are purchasing homes.

For fixed-term assistant professors, job insecurity adds an additional layer of stress. Layoffs and cuts in the Biology educational program create a sense that permanent positions are becoming even scarcer.

This also affects TT assistant professors, some of whom worry whether sufficient funding is available to secure their promotion to associate professor positions. There is concern that a performance once deemed sufficient for promotion may now be considered inadequate.

Both groups report that their workload exceeds the available time, making it difficult to focus on tasks that are most crucial for their evaluation: publications and securing research grants.

Self-Reported Stress Levels

All assistant professors were asked to rate their stress levels on a scale from 1 to 5 over the past three months, **where 1 represents no stress and 5 indicates stress at a level requiring medical leave.**

Main findings:

Lowest score: 1

Highest score: 3

Mode: 3

Average: 2,5

The lowest self-reported score was 1, and the highest was 3, with most participants rating themselves at 3. There was no stress score difference between TT and fixed-term assistant professors.

It is important to note that a score of 3 had different meanings for different individuals. For some, the score reflected unhealthy stress, while for others, it signified being busy or under pressure, but not in a way they found harmful. As expressed by participants:

"The cause is there are too many tasks that need to be done in too little time. But that has nothing to do with the University or the Department. It's just how academia is. It's inevitable to be stressed by that, but for me personally, it's not something I experience as harmful."

"I don't feel stressed. But I'm also not someone prone to negative stress. That doesn't mean I'm not busy. I'm extremely busy, but that's because I choose to take on projects that I find exciting to work on."

Some of those who rated their stress level as 3 out of 5 shared that they had recently experienced circumstances that could have led to medical leave, with a few reporting severe physical symptoms of stress.

Two participants mentioned experiencing physical symptoms of stress at the time of the dialogues. One of them stated that they had never been prone to stress before, but their current symptoms were due to a combination of personal pressures and a period of intense professional demands.

The other person accounted that their stress symptoms were solely work-related:

> *"I'm losing hair. I have no time for exercise, which means that physical well-being is deteriorating even more. I'm working until so late that I don't have any other hobbies than work. I'm so exhausted when I get home that I just watch Netflix (...). I feel like I have lost a part of my personality."*

While not everyone experienced harmful stress, this report dives into pressures that most assistant professors thought could lead to stress.

Primary sources of pressures for Fixed-Term Assistant Professors

Job Security

"It is inherently stressful to be on a temporary contract."

All fixed-term assistant professors mentioned appreciation of having the position, with the opportunities they otherwise would not have after reaching the maximum years as postdocs at Aarhus University.

At the same time, they are preoccupied with the limited availability of permanent positions and are concerned about whether they can qualify for a permanent position if one becomes available.

The scarcity of permanent positions fosters competition among assistant professors (despite them not knowing each other personally) and leads them to:

- **Working overtime:** Working extra hours and harder to excel in areas they deem most important: publishing first-author papers and securing grants.
- **Task overload:** Accepting too many tasks in order to be well-regarded within their section and to keep all opportunities open.
- **Power dynamics:** Navigating the unequal power dynamics between assistant professors and senior faculty/management, which makes it harder to decline requests that do not advance their career.
- **Teaching imbalance:** Taking on additional teaching responsibilities in an attempt to qualify for Tenure Track (TT) or associate professor positions. Although teaching is a requirement for assistant professor positions, not all Principal Investigators (PIs) acknowledge this. Challenges may arise when a PI expects the assistant professor to prioritize research over teaching.

Quotes from the Dialogues:
"The system for obtaining a tenure track position is untransparent. It feels like aiming at a moving target."

"I am very grateful that the assistant professor position exists because it shows they want me here. But the downside is that if I haven't secured a major grant by the end of my position, I can't stay. It's a way of employing people without offering job security."

"With the budget cut, I feel like there are even fewer permanent positions than before. It makes me feel powerless to know that in the end, getting a permanent position is out of my hands, and there might not be any position no matter how hard I work."

"It feels like in other industries, if you just do your job well, then you can stay in your job or even advance. But here, it's not necessarily the case that you just need to work well and hard."

"I tend to say yes to too many things to keep all doors open. As a result, I become overcommitted."

Approaches to Managing Uncertainty Among Fixed-Term Assistant Professors

Although all fixed-term assistant professors wished to continue a career within academia, they also expressed that, due to their personal lives now being tied to Aarhus, they would not pursue an academic career in other cities if no permanent position became available at Aarhus University. Several also mentioned having a Plan B in case they are unable to continue their careers at Aarhus University. However, these contingency plans often evoke mixed feelings, as their primary aspiration is to pursue a research career.

"I'm not afraid of not being able to survive because I can easily use my skills in the private sector—and with a higher salary at that. But I've sacrificed so much to build a career in academia, so it would be a difficult decision."

Primary Stress Factors for Tenure Track Assistant Professors

ABC criteria uncertainty: A recurring issue among Tenure Track assistant professors is the lack of clarity regarding the criteria for achieving an associate professor position.

This uncertainty raises questions for some about their ability to meet the requirements. While they did not appear to experience the same level of job insecurity as fixed-term assistant professors, concerns about meeting expectations were a recurring theme among participants. The impact of this uncertainty mirrors that experienced by fixed-term assistant professors:

- Taking on too many responsibilities.
- Overperforming to ensure they exceed the minimum criteria.
- Being less critical of colleagues or management to avoid being perceived as overly negative.
- Refraining from openly discussing their stress levels.

Key themes that contribute to stress

This chapter delves into themes raised by more than one assistant professor. Some themes correspond to the predefined questions included in the dialogues, while others arose directly from participants' input.

1. Uncertainty About Criteria for Both Tenure Track and Associate Professor Positions

Both TT and fixed-term assistant professors appreciate the existence of the ABC criteria and the tenure track agreement, as these provide some indication of what is required to become a TT assistant professor or associate professor. However, nearly all participants noted that the criteria remain quite vague.

On the one hand, the vagueness can be an advantage, as it allows for individual assessments.

On the other hand, the lack of clarity creates pressure because it is not clear when the criteria are fully met.

This ambiguity also raises concerns about the fairness of evaluations, as:

- Internal committee members may be biased based on their personal preferences toward the candidate.
- External committee members may lack familiarity with the research field, making it difficult to assess the candidate's performance within the specific area.
- External committee members may interpret the criteria differently, leading to variability depending on who is assigned to the committee.

Overall, these concerns reflect that it is unclear how the evaluation process works.

Specific Criteria That Raise Uncertainty

Requirement of a Stay Abroad
While several assistant professors remark that the requirement of a stay abroad has been relaxed, this change creates uncertainty about what now qualifies. Some participants expressed frustration that the criterion has shifted over time, especially if they previously prioritized gaining international experience, only to find that other factors are now deemed more important.

Emphasis on Prestige
"There is a strong focus on prestige when it comes to meeting the criteria. But I'm not sure that prestige is necessary to succeed in this role."

"There is a lot of focus on trying to publish our science in high-prestige journals. However, your chances of publishing there are not always related to the quality of your science, but how hot your topic is at the moment and how good you are at selling a story."

"Is it more important to be at a prestigious university on your stay abroad, or is it better to have been at a 'lesser-known' university but affiliated with the leading group in your field? And how can an external evaluator know that a 'lesser-known' university has the best research group in the field?"

Quality vs. Quantity

Several expressed uncertainty about whether a high quantity of published papers would count more than fewer papers of higher quality, with one expressing,

"It's unclear how much it matters to be part of a large project that produces fewer outputs but delivers higher-quality work, compared to publishing many papers."

Average Grant Levels

"Grants are expected to be average compared to what others at this level secure within the department. But what is the actual average funding obtained by others in the department?"

2. Transition from Postdoc to Assistant Professor

Fixed-Term Assistant Professors

Some assistant professors reported experiencing no significant difference from their postdoc position, other than being included in VIP meetings and retreats. They generally appreciated the inclusion.

For others, however, the role felt more demanding than their postdoc position. In addition to continuing previous tasks, they also needed to meet the same criteria as TT assistant professors to have a chance at applying for an associate professor or TT position.

"As assistant professors, we're in a position where we have more responsibilities, but since we don't have a research group, we have no one to delegate tasks to. We do everything 100% ourselves."

"It'll be interesting to see what happens if I get a starting grant because then I'll need to hire a group. But if my contract ends halfway through my PhD student's project, I don't know what will happen. It's good that the fixed-term assistant professor position exists, but it doesn't always seem well thought out."

Tenure Track Assistant Professors

“There is a disconnect between the criteria that count towards an associate professor position and how time is actually distributed in daily work.”

Most assistant professors, including those on a Tenure Track (TT), view publications and funding as the most critical criteria for advancing their careers. However, these are often the tasks they struggle to find time for.

Additional factors consuming their time include:

- Learning new skills. The transition from postdoc to TT assistant professor involves demands of teaching, forming a research group, and supervising students. These are time-intensive tasks, particularly for those with no prior experience.
- Other responsibilities, such as committee work, presentations, and peer reviews, which are perceived as having less impact on career evaluations.

“According to the Department’s guidelines on teaching, we’re supposed to be shielded from excessive tasks in teaching and supervising in the first year… but we’re not.”

Many TT assistant professors appreciate being regarded as peers on the same level as permanent staff.

However, several also feel that this equality makes their senior colleagues overlook the steep learning curve they face in taking on new responsibilities. This can leave them in a vulnerable position, especially since they are still undergoing evaluation for a permanent position.

The allocation of teaching duties within sections is a particular area where TT assistant professors feel that their distinctive challenges are not sufficiently considered.

> *“Despite advocating for myself, teaching takes up a significant amount of time, and it creates a sense of inadequacy because I feel like I’m not doing enough in any area—especially not when it comes to my own development."*

Conversely, some TT assistant professors find the Tenure Track agreement useful as a tool to decline non-career-promoting tasks when requested by colleagues.

3. Performance and Competition

Most assistant professors acknowledged that performance and competition in academia serve as both a motivation to excel, while also being a source of stress:

“I feel pressured by social media. Only success stories are shared—when someone publishes an article or secures a grant. But the reality for most is that articles often get rejected, and grants are frequently denied.”

Assistant professors from both groups reported feeling inadequate in their performance. This sense of inadequacy stems from the limited availability of permanent positions and the ambiguity surrounding the ABC criteria. Some of this pressure may also arise from a perception that others are performing better, including what one participant described as how “*academic culture notoriously fosters imposter syndrome as colleagues and peers point to flaws and uncertainties rather than praising the hard work and good effort*”.

For some, internal expectations about the quality they feel they should achieve within limited timeframes are a source of pressure:
“It’s hard to accept when you don’t have the time or skills to reach your ambitions.”

Many noted that while the flexibility to manage their working hours is one of the job’s greatest advantages, it is also challenging to structure their time effectively.

“When you have a position that is practically a 70-hour job compressed into 37 hours to maintain a real work-life balance, there are many prioritization decisions that need to be made.”

Several participants also expressed a desire for guidelines or clearer expectations about what is realistic to take on, such as the number of students to supervise, the number of PhD students or postdocs in a group, or the number of research projects to manage.

4. Colleagues and the Work Environment

All assistant professors reported receiving good support from some of their colleagues and collaborators within the department and their sections. However, several noted that some colleagues appeared to prioritize their own careers at the expense of others.

One assistant professor shared that while it could already be difficult to establish one’s profile as a junior researcher, it was even harder when senior colleagues would keep opportunities to themselves:

"Some people may decide to research something that someone else already has a specialty in but then choose not to involve them or even inform them. It’s frustrating when you can’t build trust with your closest colleagues. I prefer collaborating rather than stepping on people’s toes."

The assistant professor added that this issue had improved in recent years:
"It used to be systematic in my section a few years ago. Now it’s better."

Another assistant professor remarked that it can sometimes be difficult to discern whether a colleague is being supportive or merely offloading tasks:
"It's ways of including you, but it could also be ways of people to dump work on you."

Unequal power dynamics between senior and junior staff

Many, including TT assistant professors, shared that it is particularly difficult to refuse tasks assigned by a superior when on a fixed-term contract, as they rely on their supervisors' goodwill to progress in their careers. One assistant professor explained,

"Department lead makes it clear to assistant professors, particularly ones on fixed-term contracts, that their priority should be to publish peer-reviewed papers and apply for competitive funding to optimize their chances of getting a permanent position. This priority is not always reflected in the tasks and projects seniors ask junior researchers to take on. In principle, we can of course say no, but this is easier said than done, as they are central members of your network and may have both direct and indirect influence on your chances of being converted to a permanent staff member".

The assistant professor further highlighted how this unequal dynamic leaves junior staff in a vulnerable position:

"When junior researchers feel exploited by seniors, there are few and poor options for them to get support. Confronting seniors feels risky as they are likely very central to your network and career opportunities".

The Culture at the Department

While assistant professors generally described the department as having a positive atmosphere, some felt that the culture does not encourage open discussions about difficulties.

One assistant professor characterized the work environment as psychologically unhealthy:

> *"There is a mentality among the senior academic staff at the department that if you feel stressed, it's because you can't handle the pressure of academia."*

For this assistant professor, the perception is backed up by how senior scientific staff at their section talk about people who openly express being pressured. These experiences have led the assistant professor to avoid speaking openly about work pressure or stress.

Another assistant professor shared that while they refrain from discussing work pressure with colleagues, they do not see this as indicative of a poor work environment:

"I think my colleagues already feel that I have more time than they do. So, I don't want to ask them how they manage to be so efficient. I wouldn't have much sympathy if it was

the other way around and someone with fewer responsibilities than me came to complain about how they can't keep up. The culture here is that if you can't accomplish what you want, you just put in more hours. And I'm okay with that."

5. The Department management's Impact on Assistant Professors' Well-Being

When the department management asks assistant professors to take on tasks, it can be challenging for them to decline, even when the requests are phrased gently. This difficulty is especially pronounced for fixed-term assistant professors, who often feel less secure in their positions. Some expressed concerns that speaking out or declining tasks could hinder their career progression.

Pressure to Apply for Specific Grants
A recurring theme among several assistant professors was feeling pressured by department management to apply for certain grants, even when:

- The grant was not aligned with their research focus.
- The application deadline coincided with a period of high workload.
- They already felt overwhelmed by commitments tied to existing grants.

Mixed Responses to Declining Grant Applications
Some assistant professors who declined such requests felt their reasons were well-received and appreciated the understanding shown:

> *"I felt a pressure from the management to apply for a certain grant, but they were very forthcoming, when I told them about the pressure in my personal life"*

Others did not feel the same level of understanding and perceived that their career progression depended on applying for and securing the specific grant. This led to significant pressure.

Conversely, some participants valued being encouraged to apply for grants that ultimately benefitted their careers:

> *"The department head encouraged me to apply for a grant of my own, and now I've received it. While it's extra work to manage the project, I'm glad I applied."*

Pressure Created by the Strategy to Increase External Funding

Among assistant professors who felt unheard by department management regarding grant applications, one noted that the new strategy emphasizing external funding creates the impression that researchers are expected to work even harder.

> *"When you get funding, it means you need to work on more projects. I know that working over hours is my own choice. But the message of 'get more funds' backs up the pressure to work more than 37 hours a week."*

The assistant professor also highlighted that increasing the number of projects can lower the quality of research, as there is insufficient time to thoroughly develop each project:

> *"Department management gives advice to do something, without providing the time to do so. They want excellent research, but they want it fast. It's simply not possible."*

Lack of Transparency Regarding ABC Criteria, Tenure Track Agreements, and Departmental Strategy

For some, the pressure to apply for specific grants has led to speculation about the existence of uncommunicated strategies or criteria for becoming a Tenure Track (TT) assistant professor or associate professor.

Both fixed-term and TT assistant professors expressed a desire for greater transparency regarding any expectations or requirements for promotion that may not currently be communicated.

6. Work-Life Balance

Balancing work and family responsibilities during key career phases is a challenge many assistant professors face. One participant observed that

> *"the period when you need to prove yourself the most coincides with starting a family."*

Another noted that "*Being sleep-deprived and having a job that consists of thinking deep thoughts doesn't mix well".*

Several expressed that having a young family made them feel like they were *"not reaching their full potential"* or *"falling behind compared to colleagues without children, who work longer hours."*

At the same time, many acknowledged that having children helps structure their time and forces them to be more efficient.

> *"It became easier for me to avoid overworking when I became a parent. It brings more structure to my daily life but also adds pressure."*

To manage these pressures, some assistant professors made deliberate choices to prioritize work-life balance. One shared,

> *"I've actively chosen not to work more than 37 hours a week. It's a tough decision in a competitive field where overwork is rewarded, but for me, well-being is more important."*

The flexibility of academic work was widely appreciated, with participants noting that it allowed them to adapt their schedules to family needs.

7. Challenges of Being International and Moving to Denmark

For most, the relocation and adjustment process was challenging at first, but most participants now feel well-established and emphasized that the International Staff Office (ISO) had been a valuable source of support.

However, some noted that meeting the ABC criteria for teaching can be difficult when most courses are taught in Danish. While this provides Danish colleagues with ample opportunities to meet teaching requirements, it also leaves them with less time to write articles and apply for funding.

Some international assistant professors found it challenging to achieve a high level of proficiency in Danish, as this represents an additional requirement that Danish colleagues do not face.

Recommendations

This chapter presents recommendations for solutions based on the analysis of participants' collective input. The recommendations are listed in order of priority.

Overall, participants expressed a preference for structural changes at the department level rather than the implementation of new initiatives. Specifically, the majority requested to avoid mandatory half- or full-day seminars, which they felt created additional work pressure without providing significant benefits.

1. Mentorship

Assistant professors described the transition to greater independence as abrupt. Nearly all participants, both fixed-term and TT assistant professors, requested mentorship. The specific needs varied but could be summarized into the following roles and criteria for mentors:

Criteria

- The mentor should be a senior member of academic staff with personal experience of what it takes to advance in an academic career. Ideally, the mentor should also have recent experience as an assistant professor.
- The mentor should not be part of the same group or closely tied to the assistant professor’s collaborators but should still have a solid understanding of the NAT Faculty and Biology Department. The assistant professors differed in their opinions on whether a person from the same section, a different section or a different department would be optimal.
- The mentorship program should be facilitated by the department and introduced during the onboarding process.
- Meetings with the mentor should be flexible and tailored to the needs of both the mentor and the mentee.
- The mentor should be genuinely interested in dedicating time to the role.

Responsibilities of the Mentor

- Provide ongoing feedback on the assistant professor’s CV and identify areas needing improvement for career advancement.
- Offer guidance on which opportunities to accept or decline.
- Advise on managing a research group.
- Offer guidance on how to prioritize the working hours.

Potential Pitfalls of the Mentorship Program
Several participants mentioned that there is already conflicting information about what is required to advance to the next career stage. Priorities can differ depending on whether one consults department management, a PI, or a senior academic colleague. Therefore, the mentor should be aligned with the department management to ensure their advice is consistent.

2. Improved Onboarding for TT and Fixed-Term Assistant Professors

Clear Expectations for TT Assistant Professors
TT assistant professors noted the need for clearer onboarding that outlines expectations for the TT role, criteria for advancement, and the evaluation process. An in-person orientation session could address these points, allowing for early clarification. One participant explained:
"It would be nice if, when you arrive, you get an introduction like, 'Hey, we will be the ones who evaluate you. We have an interest in helping you along the way, so feel free to book us for a meeting if you have any questions.'"

Department management could also emphasize that the TT agreement can help assistant professors set boundaries on non-essential tasks.

Focused Career Planning for Fixed-Term Positions
Fixed-term assistant professors recommended that onboarding should provide a clear outline of career opportunities both within and outside academia, including pathways to TT or associate professor roles.

Further, the onboarding should outline that the assistant professor is obligated to teach and that when applying for grants, there should be included time for teaching.

Universal Onboarding Recommendations
For both groups, onboarding could include:

- A course on transitioning from postdoc to assistant professor, covering supervision, research group management, and relevant policies.
- Guidance on available resources at AU to support physical and professional working environments.
- A session on funding strategies, encouraging assistant professors to create a funding plan to discuss with department management, ensuring that grant suggestions become part of a two-way dialogue.

- Guidelines for workload, including specifics on how many students it is realistic to supervise simultaneously, how many projects can be managed at once, and, by extension, how many grants should be pursued.

3. Communicating Alternative Career Paths Within and Beyond Academia

Clarifying Academic Career Paths
Fixed-term assistant professors expressed uncertainty about the path to securing a permanent academic position. Clearer communication early in their careers about advancement criteria and expectations could help reduce this uncertainty and provide a sense of direction.

Exploring Careers in the Private Sector
Many assistant professors felt unprepared to envision careers outside academia due to a lack of exposure to private-sector roles. One participant observed that connecting with professionals from outside the university could provide valuable insights:

> *"I have the impression that work in the private sector is more team-based, which could be appealing compared to the solitude of academia, where so much responsibility falls on one person. But I've never felt I had a clear impression of what it's like in the private sector, which is partly why I've stayed in academia."*

By offering opportunities to meet industry professionals, the department could help bridge this gap and demonstrate how academic skills translate to private-sector roles.

Alternative Roles Within Universities
Participants also highlighted the need for better awareness of non-research roles within the university. These include positions such as chief consultant, lab manager, center manager, or roles involving fieldwork coordination. One assistant professor noted:
"It would be useful to know about alternative career paths at AU where you could still engage with research and contribute to articles without the same demands as a senior VIP."
Providing such insights during onboarding or through workshops could empower assistant professors to consider a broader range of career options.

4. Young Faculty Meetings

Assistant professors highlighted the importance of connecting with colleagues across sections but noted that such opportunities are currently limited. One participant

emphasized the value of fostering these relationships: "*There is an advantage in knowing each other, as we are the next generation to take over the department.*"

Before COVID, the department head organized meetings for all assistant professors, which participants remembered positively. These gatherings allowed them to network with peers at similar career stages and facilitated direct communication with department management, reducing the sense of hierarchy and distance.

While participants did not wish to increase the overall number of meetings, they suggested reintroducing Young Faculty meetings twice a year.

5. Ensuring PIs Support Career Advancement for Junior Researchers

Department management should encourage PIs to prioritize initiatives that further the career development of junior researchers in their groups. This can be achieved through the following strategies:

Funding for Skills Development
Assistant professors highlighted the importance of attending courses to build key competencies. One participant noted:
"My PI funded my participation in a Project Management course, which helped me think more broadly—for example, about identifying stakeholders within and outside of academia. I also attended a leadership course that provided a great introduction to managing a research group."

Many assistant professors expressed uncertainty about how to approach their new responsibilities. Aarhus University offers several courses designed to address these challenges, and PIs should be encouraged to promote participation in these programs early in the assistant professor's employment.

Opportunities for Independence
Demonstrating independence is a critical criterion for promotion to associate professor. However, participants noted that PIs might inadvertently limit these opportunities by taking over tasks such as group grant applications or budget management. To address this, department management should encourage PIs to delegate such responsibilities to junior researchers, allowing them to showcase their independence and meet evaluation criteria.

Consideration for Learning Curves
As discussed in the themes section, TT assistant professors often feel that their learning curve is not adequately considered when tasks such as teaching and administrative responsibilities are assigned. Department management should ensure that senior

academic staff are aware of these challenges and adjust workload expectations accordingly.

6. Proposed Changes to ABC Criteria

Assistant professors expressed a strong desire for greater clarity and alignment in the ABC criteria to better understand career progression expectations.

Clear Examples of Progression
Participants emphasized the need for precise examples of how to demonstrate progression, such as what distinguishes a B-level from an A-level achievement.

Encouraging Collaborative Grant Applications
Independence is a key requirement, but relaxing the criteria to allow two peers to apply for grants together could reduce individual workloads and alleviate pressure. This approach could also foster collaboration and make academic work feel less isolating.

Recognition for Co-Supervision or Allowing Fixed-Term Assistant Professors to Act as Main Supervisors
One assistant professor highlighted that some universities permit fixed-term assistant professors to be main supervisors for BSc and MSc students. At AU, they are paired with a senior academic staff as co-supervisors. While some found it comforting not to have the full responsibility, others described it as frustrating, noting that co-supervisors often handle the majority of the work but receive little recognition.

Relaxing or Clarifying Collaboration Rules with PhD Supervisors
While demonstrating independence is a key requirement, career development can be difficult if a PhD supervisor is the most logical collaborator within a specific research field. Clear guidelines are needed to specify how long junior researchers must remain independent of their PhD supervisor's group before collaboration is allowed. This would provide clarity and ensure that junior researchers can navigate these requirements without limiting their access to valuable expertise and networks.

Updating Requirements for a Stay Abroad
Assistant professors with family responsibilities highlighted the difficulty of fulfilling stay abroad requirements. Recognizing online collaborations or alternative forms of international networking could provide a more inclusive approach.