



Changes for Postdoctoral Scholars

Background

In March 2021, an Office of Postdoctoral Affairs advisory group was appointed to review the Research Associate classification. They proposed changes, which were subsequently endorsed by the Provost, the Senior Associate Provost, and the Vice President for Research and Innovation. There has long been confusion about the use of the title, resulting in inconsistencies and the potential for misuse. Intended to be a mentored training position to help launch a scholarly career, many have remained in these positions for extended periods while functioning as independent scholars. The advisory group researched best practices to clarify the purpose and parameters of the role, which informed their recommendations. Further input was gathered from stakeholders over the past year, including the Council of Research Deans, University Council of Faculty Affairs, Council of Faculty Affairs Deans, and the Postdoctoral Advisory Committee.

The university endorses the definition of a postdoctoral scholar jointly adopted by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health:

An individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue their chosen career path.

The changes include the following:

- The classification title Research Associate will be changed to Postdoctoral Scholar.
- The Senior Research Associate position will be phased out.
- Increased ease in moving those who have completed their postdoc position into other roles.
- A Postdoctoral Scholar Handbook has been created and is now available.

Title and Qualifications

- In keeping with many other major research universities, and for increased clarity, the classification title will be changed from Research Associate to Postdoctoral Scholar. This change will occur automatically in SAP on Dec. 11, 2025, updating all current Research Associate appointments to Postdoctoral Scholar.
- The Senior Research Associate classification will be phased out, and no additional appointments will be made to this title. For those who currently have the title, their title should be changed at reappointment to a more suitable classification depending on unit need and funding availability (see options below).
- Individuals who have previous postdoctoral experience and do not need significant further training or mentoring will not be hired as a Postdoctoral Scholar; other classifications must be considered.

- Given the purpose of this position, a Postdoctoral Scholar may not be appointed as on-call or no-pay, except in cases where the individual is employed by a partner organization collaborating with MSU.
- Degree and residency requirements for Postdoctoral Scholars will not change from what is currently noted in the [Academic Hiring Manual](#).
- The changes noted here do not impact the Postdoctoral Fellow position.

While the following items do not indicate changes, they are discussed here to provide increased clarity.

Terms of Appointment

The initial appointment for a Postdoctoral Scholar may be for up to three years. The opportunity for extension/renewal of the appointment up to two additional years (a total of five years), following approval by the Unit and College Dean or designee of an updated Individual Development Plan (IDP) that justifies the need and opportunity for further training and professional development broadly defined (i.e., not restricted to research activities). Suppose training/mentoring is no longer needed, but the work continues. In that case, the position should be changed to a different classification, using the most appropriate title based on the individual duties and responsibilities of the appointment.

In all cases, the appointment length is reliant on available funding and may not exceed the end date of the available support. Postdoctoral Scholars may be appointed on an annual (AN) or academic year (AY) basis. Appointments are typically full-time as members of the MSU academic staff.

Postdoctoral Scholars are recruited and appointed on a fixed-term basis to work on research projects with MSU faculty, with the understanding that they are also in a training period. The appointment is primarily research, though it may include some involvement with other mentored work (teaching, administrative projects, etc.), and this should be outlined in the mutually agreed-upon IDP. At least 10% of their time should be set aside for structured professional development and skill-building outside of the research projects.

IDPs are to be updated annually and used as a basis for evaluations.

Reappointment

Reappointment is ultimately at the discretion of the individual faculty supervisor, in consideration of the needs of the research project as well as the training sought by the Postdoctoral Scholar. Decisions not to reappoint may be for failure to meet unit standards for competence or performance, changes in program needs, or budgetary issues (e.g., lack of funding support). It is recommended that units provide as much notice as possible on these decisions, particularly if there are visa implications.

Postdoctoral Scholars may be reappointed and are limited to a maximum of five years of appointment. When Postdoctoral Scholars receive external support that necessitates a change of appointment to "Postdoctoral Fellow," the total time in the combined ranks (time as Postdoctoral Scholar + time as Postdoctoral Fellow) should not exceed five years.

Reclassification of Appointment

Postdoctoral Scholars may be reclassified when they have reached maximum time in rank or when training objectives have been completed by mutual agreement between the individual and the supervisor. This would also be dependent on available funding and the need for the work. See the table below for title options most utilized in this scenario.

Table 1. Title Options for Reclassification

Titles	Degree Minimum	Other Considerations
Academic Specialist, Research, Fixed-Term	PhD	Takes a lead role on projects
Assistant Professor, Fixed-Term	PhD	
Research Faculty – Assistant Professor	PhD	Supported by sponsored projects or other non-appropriated university funds
HP Assistant Professor	Terminal medical degree and relevant, valid license and/or certification in Michigan	

Postdoctoral Scholars are also eligible to apply for other MSU position openings in accordance with standard university appointment policies and procedures or positions at other organizations.

Please see the [Postdoctoral Scholar Handbook](#) for additional details.