Professional Offboarding Processes for Sustainable and Future-Oriented Universities

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Professional offboarding processes offer great potential facing the shortage of skilled professionals through demographic changes, lack of resources and fast changes in the current work era. A precise and appreciative approach regarding administration, knowledge management and the professional accompaniment throughout the separation process leads to better and more sustainable solutions to fill or bridge personnel gaps. While companies have increasingly recognized this potential, professional offboarding processes are not yet treated as a strategic solution by the human resource management of colleges and universities. Possible reasons for this are described. We present how colleges may increase sustainability in their human resource management through professional offboarding processes. As examples we focus on offboarding due to fixed-term contracts and on offboarding due to retirement, a topic of urging relevance, especially in Germany and other similarly aging (European) countries.

Keywords: offboarding, shortage of skilled professionals, governance

How can universities meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, e.g. due to a lack of qualified staff through demographic changes, societal crises, technological change and digital transformation, with a forward-looking and sustainable human resource management? Which strategies and framework conditions are needed for this? In this article, we like to present a strategic approach whose potential has been recognised by companies (Kesselhut & Gaßmann, 2022; Kraft, 2024; Spaeth, 2024), but which has not yet been sufficiently taken up by universities and colleges (Baldwin, 2018; Berli & Reuter, 2023): Professional offboarding processes.

Offboarding – as a counterpart to onboarding – refers to the designed separation process when an employee leaves an organisation. This process pays off for organisations in both social and economic terms and can be seen as a human resources strategy to increase sustainability (Spaeth, 2024). At a large German university, an average of about 15 % left the organisation in the years 2022–2024, of which about 8 % into retirement, whereby departures due to the expiry of fixed-term employment contracts and cases of dissolution or termination of employment contracts as part of early retirement have also been taken into account. With around 15 % separations per year, offboarding is not a niche topic, and at the same time represents a far-reaching change at the individual, societal and organisational level: How is this change being

handled? Are organisations, workgroups and individuals able to cope with this challenge? Both, the literature to date and the exchange of experience with other universities and higher education institutions in Germany (workshops in January and June 2025, University of Cologne), show that the offboarding of employees has not yet received sufficient attention, neither on an organisational nor on an individual level to make higher education institutions fit for the future and increase the sustainability of its human resource management (Baldwin, 2018; Berli & Reuter, 2023). Especially, the concept of retirement, which was standardised after World War II, needs a more individualised update now as people live up to 20–25 years beyond traditional retirement ages of 65 or 70, which is especially the case in Germany and other similarly aging (European) countries (Baldwin, 2018). In Germany, more than 40 % of university professors will be replaced by 2033 due to demographic change (CHE Centre of Higher Education, 2025).

Professional offboarding processes initially offer both, the organisation and the individual, a smooth transition through clarity, (legal) security and orientation. However, professional offboarding processes also offer the chance to develop new forms of cooperation, to make a good last impression as an employer and thus to strategically expand the network of the individual and the organisation. In the spirit of *Retention is the new Recruiting* offboarding can become onboarding, e. g. by recommending the university as an employer, or by returning from another organisation after some time (Spaeth, 2024). In addition, professional offboarding processes are resource-efficient, as staff changes are accompanied by a targeted process in terms of administration and knowledge management. Therefore, a new employee may receive a well-structured document with relevant information and condensed knowledge of the predecessor to have a good and efficient start in an on-going project. This ensures continuity of work and increases the university's efficiency. Finally, offboarding processes serve to recognise the work performed at the university, increase the attractiveness of the organisation as an employer in the sense of employer branding and thus simultaneously increase the motivation, loyalty and commitment of those who remain. For example, a (moderated) final team meeting can be a valuable and appreciative element in offboarding processes from which all involved can learn. In this team meeting, all team members could share their experience together and what they have learned, it could be a space for feedback and gratitude. Valuing the work done has been shown to have positive effects on employees and the organisation, for example through increased commitment, which can also have an impact after direct collaboration (Gauglitz, 2019). In the following we focus on offboarding due to fixed-term contracts and on offboarding due to retirement. The fluctuation of academic staff is part of the human resource strategy of universities (Schürmann et al., 2016). For example, the turnover rate for doctoral students is very high and is even around 35 % for temporary doctoral students (Konsortium BuWiK, 2025). In this context, it is important to bear in mind that fixed-

term contracts are very common in academia and that at least temporary offboarding can be useful for individual career opportunities and/or alternative paths outside academia may be necessary. In these cases, professional offboarding processes can significantly expand the university's network and increase the probability of a return at a later career stage. In the case of transitions into retirement, we would even go so far as to classify professional offboarding processes as a duty of care, and at the same time see very great potential in the development of new forms of cooperation (e.g. voluntary involvement, senior professorships). With the retirement of the largest cohorts born between 1957 and 1969, the so-called Baby Boom cohort, the labour market in Germany will lose around 12.9 million people in the next few years (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). Younger workers will not be able to replace older ones in terms of numbers. The transition to retirement thus takes on a new significance for employers. It is necessary to rethink the "all-or-nothing/on-or-off" approach to offboarding and retirement (Baldwin et al., 2018): Will it be possible to develop a win-win situation for a different form of cooperation? Especially retiring professors often remain active in the academic community after their work at the university – e.g. through publications or third-party funding projects – and the question remains as to how this can be designed as a win-win situation. All in all, professional offboarding processes offer a strategic solution for closing or efficiently bridging personnel gaps in times of scarce resources, rapid changes and lack of qualified staff through demographic changes. Professional offboarding processes create an appreciative bond between university and employee, are resource-efficient due to a structured process including knowledge management, therefore increase the social and economic sustainability of the human resources management.

Despite all these advantages, the question remains as to why professional offboarding processes have not yet made a significant strategy in universities and colleges. This may be due to the fact that the many and varied challenges tend to obscure the view and that the *urgent* takes precedence over the *important*. Filling a vacancy is given priority, while the exit interview with a long-serving employee is neglected. Some departures are also burdened by difficulties with the person in the run-up. Professional offboarding processes require a future-oriented mindset. In line with Dweck (2006), we suggest that a *growth mindset* rather than a *fixed mindset* of human resources managers and leaders is helpful for the introduction and implementation of professional offboarding processes. While people with a fixed mindset are fixated on the status quo and dwell on setbacks, a growth mindset is about seeing challenges as opportunities, seeking constructive feedback and believing in the evolution of the status quo. With a "growth mindset", dismissals and separation processes can be seen as new opportunities and not as a mistake or the final end of a joint journey. In addition to this question of attitudes towards retirement, we also assume that there is conscious or unconscious age discrimination, which stands in the way of the effective development

of new forms of cooperation and leaves much potential unused in times of a shortage of skilled workers (Oberdiek, 2004). From this point of view, professional offboarding processes due to retirement can also be part of a diversity strategy to develop a new picture of older employees. What can be the first steps for universities to rethink the separation of person and organisation and to proactively use the potential of offboarding processes to increase social and economic sustainability? To begin with, we propose two interventions which, in our view, are both cost-effective and particularly urgent: From an organisational perspective, these are training offers for leaders who can develop professional offboarding processes for their teams and deal with a helpful mindset. These training offers should include all types of offboarding scenarios, e. g. offboarding due to fixed-term contracts and offboarding due to retirement. Leaders are the direct contact to the employees and shape the experience of employees with an organisation. Therefore, leaders are the ones who can develop an appreciative culture and increase sustainability with professional offboarding processes. Of course, leaders need support from the administration and human resource management to reach this aim. From an individual perspective, we also suggest workshops, e. g. career counselling for the ones with fixed-term contracts and for those who are retiring in order to frame this emotionally significant process and open up new perspectives. Finally, in developing offboarding as a strategy, it is necessary to develop a university-wide standard for offboarding and to adapt it to the values, culture and goals of the university in the sense of employer branding. It is a matter of developing checklists, time schedules, measures and making these a value- and goal-oriented standard at a university, regardless of the popularity of a person or the reason for offboarding. At the University of Bielefeld in Germany, for example, the university secretaries have formed a working group to jointly develop standard and useful tools for offboarding processes (Universität Bielefeld, n. d.). The Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) in Germany bundles concrete offers on the subject of offboarding such as the support of start-up initiatives for employees on its homepage and communicates its own position with the quote from Aristotle: *"We cannot direct the wind. But we can adjust the sails"* (FAU, n. d.). According to a human resource manager at the University of Münster (Germany), a wide range of documents and checklists for the administration and knowledge management in offboarding processes are already available, and the first workshops on the subject are currently being planned (S. Brück, personal communication, June 11, 2025). As an international example the University of California (UCLA) can be named, whereas Professor Emerita Rosina Becerra serves as UCLA's Faculty Retirement Liaison supporting retirement agreements for faculty members (UCLA, n. d.). At ETH Zurich a brochure with the most important IT information for employees leaving the university is available and leads to more transparency and facilitates the process (ETH Zurich, 2025). At Maastricht University experiences of pre- and post-retirement academic staff have been collected and golden rules for a comprehensive retirement policy have been defined, e. g. *"Listening to what retirees*

need." (Swinnen et al., 2021). Further, universities and higher education institutions can learn from companies and adapt measures to their own conditions and objectives. First companies already have a number of concrete measures that make offboarding a human resource strategy to increase sustainability in times of a shortage of skilled workers, for example by offering talks on further professional development, written offers to return to the workplace after leaving or a structured way of dealing with freelancers (Spaeth, 2024).

In sum, we would like to invite human resources managers and staff at universities and higher education institutions to engage with offboarding and to proactively shape this process to increase sustainability. The potential of professional offboarding processes is currently still underestimated in ethical, social and economic terms, but could be pursued as a future strategy with a "growth mindset". Also, more research is needed on offboarding processes at universities, on offboarding policies, concrete procedures and its linkage to sustainability.

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