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Developing the role and career pathways of RSEs in Germany: Current perspectives and future aims

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Developing the role and career pathways of RSEs in Germany: Current perspectives and future aims

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Abstract: We report from a Birds of a Feather (BoF) session at the deRSE26 conference, where we focused on current career structures for Research Software Engineers (RSEs) in Germany and also consider international developments in Research Software Engineering. Starting from this, we distil what we, as a community, see as the most important areas where the RSE role can and should be developed in Germany, and how we think career pathways for professional RSEs can be improved.

Keywords: RSE, career pathways, community, technical roles, digital research technical professional

1 Introduction

The term 'Research Software Engineer' (RSE) has now been around for over a decade. In the time since it was coined back in 2012, we have witnessed many improvements how people undertaking software engineering are recognised and supported within the research community. However, these advances seem to follow slightly different pathways in different countries. In Germany, these changes have been realised through the creation, growth and formalisation of the deRSE community, representing people building and maintaining research software across a range of roles. In the German research community, particularly within universities, the job title 'Research Software Engineer' is still fairly unusual—even many of those that primarily develop research software have roles that classify them as researchers or academics.

Our intended aims for the BoF session we report from were:

- An improved understanding of the challenges RSEs face or the concerns they have around career progression.
- Community perspectives on suitable career pathways for technical roles.

- Approaches for engaging with key stakeholders to promote greater awareness and recognition of the importance of supporting technical roles.

We see this development of career pathways for RSEs as a long-term challenge for our community and we therefore hope that this topic will be covered annually at deRSE. By cataloguing this year's fears and hopes we plan to review progress next year and to plan catalysing further change.

2 Facilitation of the workshop

The workshop was performed as part of the program of deRSE26 and around 50 people gathered to share their insights in 90 minutes before the lunch break. The session was divided into two parts. First we had some lightning talks by selected speakers to share their experiences. Then a fish-bowl discussion was performed augmented with a mentimeter survey.

With the voluntary survey we received anonymous responses by the participants, to get wider perspectives. To further anonymise results, we will only discuss quantitative results in a qualitative manner and cluster individual free form responses in the following sections.

We conducted three rounds of fish-bowl with roughly 20 minutes each. First we started by focusing on how RSEs see themselves, and how they are seen by others. The second round considered a more outwards looking perspective, what they feel is missing, and which opportunities they see. And in the last round we asked about systemic changes that are required.

3 Report on the invited lightning talks

3.1 Jeremy Cohen: RSE Roles and Career Structures in the UK

In order to provide an international perspective on Research Software Engineering roles and career structures, Jeremy Cohen presented a brief summary of how RSE has developed in the UK since the term was first used back in 2012 (for further detail, see Simon Hettrick's not-so-brief history of RSE [Het16]). Jeremy then looked at an ongoing challenge of where RSE roles best fit into university structures, based on work currently being undertaking with colleagues in the STEP-UP project. With research processes becoming increasingly digital across all domains, it is more important than ever that we recognise not only people delivering research software skills and expertise but also research data and research computing infrastructure practitioners. In this context, Jeremy highlighted the emergence of the term "digital Research Technical Professionals" (dRTPs) [STE25] within the UK community. This term is increasingly being used to represent technical professionals whose work is focused on research software, research data, research computing infrastructure, or a combination of these. As recognition and use of the dRTP term grows, we are beginning to see it being used beyond the UK. The Research Software Engineering space within the UK has developed from the first RSE team, set up at University College London in 2012, to the landscape that we see today with more than 40 RSE teams and groups at institutions across the UK [Soc19]. The role of the RSE has now become internationally recognised with RSE groups being set up at universities and research-performing organisations in a

number of countries around the world. Despite this, there are many different approaches to hosting RSE roles. While many institutions set up RSE groups or teams because they recognise the value and importance of supporting researchers in developing sustainable, maintainable, high-quality research software, institutional role structures are often not ideally suited to such roles. Jeremy highlighted how many universities have role structures that are well suited to traditional academic and research posts, teaching-focused posts and then a wide variety of other "professional services" roles that often encompass institutional management, research support, IT and other roles. RSE roles can cover a wide area, with some looking much more like researcher-type roles and others looking like traditional industry software engineering roles. Jeremy presented a graphic highlighting how many RSE roles don't fit directly with either of these extremes but instead fall into a gap between what traditional university role structures are designed to support. Institutions are just beginning to experiment with ways to address this through developing new role structures and career pathways that support a growing demand for specialist technical roles that have a close proximity to research and are a vital part of the modern research life cycle. It is this shift, in part, that has underpinned the emergence of the dRTP term and Jeremy concluded by highlighting a group of "dRTP NetworkPlus" projects funded under a 2024 UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Digital Research Infrastructure programme call [UK 24] to look at a range of challenges relating to dRTP skills and careers.

3.2 Toby Hodges: Opportunities for RSEs from the view of The Carpentries

Toby Hodges summarised a view of the RSE community from the perspective of The Carpentries, a US-based nonprofit supporting the work of a global community teaching software and data skills for research. He started by highlighting the large representation of RSEs within The Carpentries community. He proposed that this was a result of the co-evolution of the two communities, and indicative of the long-running support for the mission of The Carpentries by like-minded organisations such as the UK Software Sustainability Institute. Another factor that he considered important was the RSE community's commitment to collaboration and cooperation. He believed these values motivate a large number of RSEs to contribute to the shared development and maintenance of open source tools and resources, such as The Carpentries' curricula. Responding to a prompt to speculate on the career prospects of young academics who choose to pursue a career in software development, Toby expressed some uncertainty about what the future will hold but struck a positive note about the enduring value of skills that RSEs develop. Using problem-solving, communication, and collaboration as examples, he asserted that the skills that are essential to successful Research Software Engineering will remain invaluable regardless of how the process of software development evolves in coming years.

3.3 Mihaela Jarema: working as an RSE in industry outside of academia

Next up was the lightning talk by Mihaela Jarema that focused first on how she supported researchers in industry. She has experience in developing software in academia that she gained during her PhD at TUM and also during previous formal training in Computer Science degrees. After her PhD she moved to an industry role with the Job title "Senior Education Customer Success Engineer" which provided her with the opportunity to support researchers and lecturers

across Europe with commercial computational tools (AI, Data Science, HPC, Sustainable Software Development) At the start of 2026 she moved on to a freelance role as educator, content creator, and consultant for sustainable research software and data engineering. She summarised the RSE community in two words as collaborative and complementary. She said that working in industry has the advantage of a stable career and access to resources at the cost of being limited in scope. When working for a company the expectation is that you represent the interests of the company and promote its tools. As an independent freelancer she now has the freedom to focus on what researchers actually need in contrast to what the company is trying to sell. The demand for good computational education for researchers exceeds the supply. Therefore, she has mission autonomy but less financial security. Nevertheless, both career paths share the idea of creating better software for better research.

3.4 Heidi Seibold: What is wrong with academia, and what you can do outside of academia to improve it

Heidi opened by laying out the conventional research trajectory she herself had followed: From bachelor and master in statistics, a PhD in bio-statistics, postdoc positions to finally leading her own data science research group. At this promising position within the standard academic career path however, a discrepancy between her passion for improving the quality of research, research software and promoting and supporting Open Science on the one hand, and the responsibilities and duties of a group lead on the other hand emerged. The pressure to deliver traditional metrics of academic achievement, which were also demanded by the responsibility for the career-prospects of early stage scientists under her supervision, clashed with the aspiration to set standards in and promote Open Science practices. Realising the incoherence between a position in the academic system and the ideal of Open Science, which also includes a criticism of current academic evaluation and hiring practices, helped her to make the decision to leave academia in 2022 and become a freelancer as trainer and consultant for open and reproducible data science. This form of self-employment developed into the formation of the Digital Research Academy (DRA), which was incorporated in August 2024. DRA has been growing rapidly since then. Today it consists of a core-team of 3–4 people, which serves more than 1000 learners and more than 50 trainers. Heidi's story is testament for the fact that research can not only be improved from within the academic system, and that focused efforts from independent individuals and small companies might be quite effective to spread Open Science skills and know-how.

4 The Fish-bowl discussion

4.1 How do RSEs see themselves and their duties?

We started the survey by asking about the professional identity of participants. Unsurprisingly, given the conference theme, the largest group of participants identified as RSEs. The next largest portion were 'scientists who code' followed by equal groups of 'software engineer/computer scientists', 'researcher' and 'other', which could not be further specified.

To get an idea about how the work of RSEs is perceived in their institutions we asked the following four questions measured on a Likert scale from $\{1,\ldots,5\}$ indicating 'not at all' in

agreement up to 'extremely' in agreement with the statement.

- 'Do people know what you do?' has an average of 3.4 with very few participants answering 'not at all'. As Research Software Engineer is a relatively new and deliberately broad job description we consider it unsurprising.
- 'Are you satisfied with your position in your organisation? (e. g. decision-making opportunities, autonomy, resource access, etc.)' had an average of 3.6 with no votes for 'not at all' and most votes on 'agree'.
- 'Are you happy with how your work is evaluated?' averaged at 3.0 with the largest amount of votes on 'neutral'. Both positive options received the same amount of votes while the less negative option received more votes than 'not at all'.
- 'Are you satisfied with your career prospects in your current role?' averaged at 2.7 with the fewest votes on 'yes, totally!' and similar number of votes for all other options.

To get a better understanding of the career perspectives and prospects we asked the participants to share what they like and dislike in their current positions in free form.

The likes can be clustered into the technical part, the interpersonal part, (academic) freedom and research as well as a feeling of contributing to something meaningful (e. g. science/knowledge and open source). Interestingly, this coincides with the three pillars of technical, interpersonal and research skills we have identified in past workshops [GAB+25]. This hints at people liking the variety of applying these skills in their daily work, with some participants even mentioning variety explicitly.

The dislikes cluster around (academic) job insecurity, bureaucracy, and the current academic evaluation system. The first cluster is the largest and not too unsurprising, as the #IchBinHanna-movement[1] has highlighted issues with the current Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz (academic temporary contract law) and limited perspectives for permanent contracts and job advancements in publicly funded research. This was also reflected in the previous question with a majority of answers not being satisfied with their current career perspectives. The current academic evaluation system cluster, which is mostly focused on text publications and their citation metrics, reflects the answers of the question on work evaluation.

4.2 How do RSEs see their career, and what do they feel is missing?

We have gathered community feedback via two questions that we elaborate on in more details below, and add some discussion and thoughts of our own towards the end of this subsection.

4.2.1 What is missing for you as an RSE?

We again gathered feedback from the entire audience via mentimeter of what they feel is missing and to summarise, we found that the responses cluster around three dominant themes — career path and progression, funding and job security, and recognition — with two additional cross-cutting concerns: organisational role clarity and the need for greater visibility of RSE work.

[1] https://ichbinhanna.wordpress.com/

The most frequently cited need is a clear, structured career path with defined milestones and long-term prospects. This is consistent with the broader literature, where the absence of permanent non-professorial positions in Germany — particularly within the 'Mittelbau' — effectively renders RSE roles career dead ends (Anzt et al., 2020 [ABD+20]). The FutuRSI study identifies the lack of attractive career paths and the limited visibility of existing ones as one of five general challenges for research software in Germany (Mannseicher et al., 2025 [MLK+25]).

Closely related is the demand for long-term, baseline funding decoupled from short-term project cycles. Respondents repeatedly emphasised job security and institutional continuity as prerequisites for sustained contributions to research software. As Jensen & Katz (2025 [JK25]) observe, traditional funding mechanisms have typically been tied to short-term, PI-led projects, offering RSEs few pathways to sustained employment and professional growth.

A third major theme is recognition — both of RSEs as professionals and of software as a legitimate research output. Respondents called for evaluation metrics beyond publication counts and for a greater understanding of the importance of maintainable software among group leaders. This echoes international findings that insufficient recognition of software contributions remains a systemic barrier to RSE career development (Cohen et al., 2021 [CKB+21]). The demand for role models and success stories further underscores the need to increase the visibility of RSE careers, which could help establish the profession as a viable and respected path within academia.

Beyond these three dominant themes, respondents highlighted organisational challenges related to role clarity. Calls for a clearer distinction between technical and management responsibilities, clearer collaboration structures, and transparent processes for project assignment reflect the well-documented ambiguity of the RSE role, in which a single person may simultaneously act as user, developer, and project manager (Goth et al., 2025 [GAB+25]). A recent survey found that 77% of respondents characterised the role understanding of RSEs as 'unclear and vague' (Druskat & Theis, 2025 [DT25]). Finally, several responses point toward broader policy measures — including a national open science strategy and dedicated development time — as necessary systemic enablers for RSE career development.

4.2.2 How do you promote RSE in your organisation?

A second question where we performed polling was on the question of how participants promote RSE within their organisation. Here we wanted specifically to collect and share ideas that participants had and via this report spread them also into the wider RSE community.
This summary clusters workshop responses on how Research Software Engineering (RSE) is or should be promoted within organisations. It distinguishes between intended (desired) practices and explicitly stated current practices. RSE promotion relies heavily on making the topic visible across the organisation. The desired state is that there should be

- regular communication channels (newsletters, email, wiki)
- events such as workshops, tutorials, and community days
- clear role denomination ("RSE" as a recognised term), that can be communicated clearly to the outside
- cross-institutional visibility.

But in practice we often observe that its often dependent on individuals promoting RSE informally, and in some cases, no visibility at all. The state of affairs with regard to promoting RSE reflects the range of awareness and political acceptance of the idea. On the one hand, there are organisations that treat RSE as a standard part and have a dedicated team that promotes RSE services, on the other hand RSE is not visible as a cross-cutting concern at all. RSE is strongly tied to knowledge exchange and training. It would be desirable if there was structured training, tutorials, and certifications, community events (e.g., developer days), and active networks and communities of practice. But in practice we often observe individual-driven initiatives, and some isolated examples of events or active members. A central theme is the need to embed RSE within formal organisational structures. To that end we would need dedicated RSE groups or departments, integration into policies (e.g., Open Science, Open Source), bundling of RSE-related projects, and clear organisational responsibilities. But in reality from the participants responses we infer, that there are fragmented groups without overarching strategy, predominantly bottom-up initiatives, some examples of formal groups or clusters. This highlights that there is a gap between grassroots activity and stable institutional structures. In terms of recognition and career pathways it would be desirable if there were defined career paths for RSEs, long-term or permanent positions, recognition of software as a research output, awards, funding opportunities, and publication venues. But we see a only partial support from supervisors and a lack of long-term career perspectives and stability hence recognition mechanisms are widely desired but rarely implemented structurally. RSE should be embedded as a core component of research processes. See chapter six of the 'FutuRSI paving the way' paper [MLR+25]. Restating this would mean a recognition of software as both infrastructure and research output, strong integration with HPC and IT services, and proactive support for researchers. But from the responses we infer that RSE is often framed as a support service and the interaction with users is mainly operational (e. g., HPC support). This means that RSE is frequently positioned as a service rather than an equal research contribution. Cultural perception plays a critical role in the adoption of RSE. RSE should be a valued and integral part of research with positive and attractive positioning. But reality shows that it is perceived as a "necessary evil" with low awareness or unclear relevance, hence cultural acceptance remains a major barrier. The responses point at the deeper reason that there lies a gap between active efforts (communication, events, training) and the lack of structural embedding (career paths, recognition, institutional strategy). A deeper elaboration of how to move forward is in the FutuRSI white paper [MLK+25] here for an strategic outlook on the institutionalisation of RSE.

4.3 Which systemic, high-level changes are required to enhance your career?

Again, we gathered feedback from the entire audience, and found that the responses cluster into four interconnected areas: advocacy and lobbying, community building, professionalisation, and institutional guidance.

The most prominent theme is advocacy directed at decision-makers. Respondents expect professional societies to lobby funding agencies and institutional leadership for long-term contracts, dedicated RSE funding, and the formal recognition of software as a research output. Several responses call for position papers and policy development targeting specific structural barriers in the German system, such as the Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz or the Teilzeit- und Befris-

tungsgesetz applied to third-party-funded projects. This resonates with Anzt et al. [ABD+20], who emphasise that research institutions and funding agencies should not only be open-minded regarding existing volunteer organisations such as de-RSE e.V., but should actively promote the creation of and work done by such groups. The FutuRSI study further underscores that research software must be recognised at all levels as an essential research output, requiring persuasion and advocacy with funding organisations and policymakers, alongside structural adjustments such as institutionalising (some) RSE development work, adapting recruitment practices, and facilitating career paths through permanent positions [MLK+25].

A second major theme is community building and networking. Respondents value events, fishbowl discussions, network meetings, and the support of local RSE groups as mechanisms for exchange and mutual learning. This aligns with the emergence of regional RSE communities described by Cohen et al. [CKB+21], which bridge local and national networks, provide opportunities to learn from different institutional approaches, and support smaller institutions that lack a critical mass of RSEs. Goth et al. [GCC+25] envision this trajectory continuing, with national RSE communities increasingly collaborating with local partners and regular international conferences amplifying these connections.

Third, respondents call for professionalisation through certification programs, career definitions, and formal study curricula. The desire for a certification that enables career progression — analogous to industry certifications — reflects the broader challenge of defining the RSE role within existing academic structures. Notably, the community has already begun addressing this need: Goth et al. [GAB+25] have defined foundational competencies spanning software engineering, research, and communication skills, providing a framework for training and continuous professional development that organisations could build upon. This work forms the foundation for a joint project of GI and de-RSE, which aims for recommendations for Master-Level Education in Research Software Engineering.

Finally, several responses emphasise guidance and mentorship — offering institutions concrete examples of how to establish RSE groups, secure funding, and showcase RSE career paths. This need for coordination is echoed by the German FutuRSI initiative, which calls for a governance structure that consolidates findings, coordinates advocacy, and builds strategic partnerships with universities, research institutions, and funding organisations [MLK+25].

Looking beyond the career pathways of RSEs in Germany, we asked participants which particular changes they would like to see implemented in Germany. We structured the replies and list them here:

Recognition and formal education

- Official RSE career path and role definition, combined with an internationally accepted competency/skills framework for RSEs (ideal for an Erasmus Mundus program)
- Fellowship and leadership programmes (example: UK leadership programme)
- Stronger recognition of mid-level academic/technical staff (“Make Mittelbau great again!”)

Career

- More permanent technical and mid-level positions (incl. RSEs, lab managers)

- Lecturer / teaching-focused professorships
- Mechanisms to fund permanent staff through continuous temporary grants

Resources (Funding & Programs)

- Dedicated research software funding (development + maintenance)
- Small-scale, short-term development grants
- Long-term funding instruments (e.g., maintenance funds beyond DFG-backed positions)

Structure (Institutional & Organisational)

- National-level institutions for research software (e.g., SSI / eScience center NL-style or US National labs)
- RSE groups embedded across research organisations
- Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs)
- Professionalised research software services and infrastructure

Our in-person discussion within the fish-bowl also highlights that there are a few aspects that are not tied to specific borders but to society in general. It was remarked that society's perception should change such that scientific knowledge is at least as important as 'product' generation. A change of research assessment practices and with that a call for institutions to sign the Coara Agreement was voiced. Connected to this, the gap in the use of software citations compared to other publication forms is still huge, despite software being used in the majority of research publications. This topic needs to be addressed further with stricter requirements for reviewers, funding agencies, and journals.

The RSE community still lacks a critical mass of high-profile voices that can drive our agenda. One way could be to also turn to the many recently tenured professors that built their career on the back of research software and know its value.

Another is to continue to support the already existing lobbying initiatives within the de-RSE association. Through its various working groups and its involvement in FutuRSI and other projects and initiatives, the association, and particularly its active members, have driven many of the changes in recent years. They are likely to continue doing so in the years to come.

5 Summary

We have examined the current state of Research Software Engineering (RSEng) careers in Germany, drawing on discussions from the workshop held at deRSE26. Participants highlighted that although recognition of RSEs has improved internationally, Germany still lacks clear career structures, permanent positions, and formal recognition for research software contributions. Key challenges identified include job insecurity, limited career progression, insufficient funding, unclear role definitions, and evaluation systems that prioritise publications over software development. The workshop also emphasised the importance of institutional support, stronger advocacy,

dedicated RSE groups, training programs, and national strategies to better integrate research software into academic research culture. However, sustainable career pathways, long-term funding, and broader recognition of software as a research output are essential for strengthening the RSE profession in Germany. Participants feel that the professional and academic societies could do more to promote RSEs in the universities, and called – to 'Make Mittelbau Great Again!' – thereby reversing the trend of hollowing out the academic mid level.

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