

You're an AHRC Postdoc: What next?

On 18 March 2015, the AHRC organised an event for postdoctoral researchers supported through AHRC grants, to discuss the issues facing this group, to enable networking, and to provide a forum for them to contribute to AHRC policy and wider thinking.

Presentations in the morning looked at examples of good practice for ECRs, in terms of participation in skills development activities and professional networks (e.g. subject associations and learned societies). The broad issue of institutional support for ECRs post-PhD was also covered, as was the role of university research staff associations in providing supportive networks.¹

Vitae² staff facilitated a 'post-it session' shortly before lunch to identify key issues facing AHRC postdocs. Participants then used the afternoon to discuss a subset of these issues and to suggest ways forward. A summary is presented below.

Funding

Availability of information

Participants considered that they weren't sufficiently aware of the funding opportunities open to them, and suggested creating a central web resource listing these.

AHRC note: The AHRC website carries information about [AHRC current opportunities](#). There is a monthly email alert which anyone can register for [here](#).

Creating strong applications

It was thought that universities could do more to help their postdocs by providing advice, mentoring, and training in making high quality applications to funding bodies. Participants felt they should be given access to such training, particularly where it was already being offered to other staff members.

AHRC note: The Peer Review College section of the AHRC website carries a variety of [resources on strengthening applications](#), and the application process in general.

Eligibility

Not all participants were immediately eligible to apply for AHRC grants as PIs, as their existing fixed-term contracts would not cover them for the lifetime of any new grant. It was suggested that the AHRC could help by reviewing its funding

¹ More information about the UK Research Staff Association may be found [here](#).

² Vitae is an international programme led and managed by CRAC (the Careers Research and Advisory Centre) which is dedicated to active career learning and development. More information can be found [here](#).

model, and perhaps offering some grants which didn't require an affiliation/contract at the point of application (similar to those offered by the British Academy and Leverhulme).

Research

The practical problem of implementing genuinely interdisciplinary research was raised, with the feeling that, while it was often an aspect of project applications, the structure of many universities hindered it in practice. Some also questioned its marketability, fearing that an interdisciplinary research profile would prevent them from obtaining further positions in a 'discipline specific' job market.

A further point of difficulty for participants was the need to demonstrate impact in their research, and also to convey it in a variety of forms to different audiences. Some saw this as being at odds with their core function as academic knowledge-producers. The need to focus on the most relevant audience was recognised. It was also noted that the metrics needed to change depending on the type of impact being measured.

Support and development

Development in project time

The importance of providing long-term career development opportunities, beyond the immediate needs of the project, was strongly emphasised. In particular, the issue of inconsistency in the proportion of time allowed across projects for postdocs' personal research, publication, training, and conference-attendance was raised. Participants suggested that the AHRC could provide firmer guidance to PIs on the appropriate professional development of their researchers.

AHRC note: The Research Funding Guide does outline the AHRC's expectations in this regard, although there is perhaps scope to give examples of appropriate activities.³

Institutional support

A related issue was the difficulty of access to research and travel funds which were often only available to permanent staff. Some participants also reported that in disciplines with relatively few postdocs, gaining institutional recognition of their needs was difficult, and that they often felt forgotten.

Mentoring

The value of professional mentoring was also highlighted, in helping guide postdocs through this transitional period into permanent employment (academic

³ 'The Research Organisation must provide research staff with a statement, at the outset of their employment, setting out the provisions for career management and development, including personal skills training, and ensure that they have access to appropriate training opportunities.' [Research Funding Guide](#) (Version 2.7; August 2014), Page 102.

or otherwise), and giving them insight into the realities of an academic career. It was thought that mentoring by mid-career staff, with recent personal experience of ECR issues, would be particularly helpful, as would the use of staff from outside the postdoc's department, whom participants felt would be more impartial.

On the subject of careers beyond the academy, it was appreciated that PIs might not be able to give comprehensive advice, and that university careers departments could be consulted more by postdocs in making their career choices.

Coaching was also considered to be valuable in supporting researchers in their personal and professional development.

Teaching

It was recognised that teaching experience was a necessary part of the portfolio of skills required to pursue an academic career. However, postgraduate teaching opportunities were limited, as postdocs were often not allowed to supervise PhD students formally. Where undergraduate and Master's teaching was possible, it was considered important that this be made available to postdocs, but this had to be balanced against their research time.

Recognition

Uncertainty was expressed about the issue of intellectual property on projects, with many participants being unsure of the extent to which the research they carried out belonged to them or their PI. The importance of recognition for their work in publications or presentations was raised as this would be essential in developing their research profile.

Work-life balance

Many participants were uneasy about their positions on fixed-term contracts, and the intense competition of the academic job market. As a result of the scarcity of posts, some were dealing with long commutes and so were not able to integrate fully into institutional life, which hampered the professional networking necessary for career progression. In other cases, it was necessary to re-locate to secure a post. This was particularly difficult for those with families or caring responsibilities.