

Postdocs power research

Later this month, postdoctoral researchers and representatives from research associations around the United Kingdom will gather in Cambridge, UK, for the first National Postdoc Meeting, also the inaugural event of the latest Postdoc Centre of the University of Cambridge. This gathering coincides with the United States National Postdoc Appreciation Week and marks increasing, though long overdue, attention for this group of early-career researchers. What are the major challenges?

Over the past 10 years in the UK, the higher education landscape has changed strikingly through dramatic increases in postdoc numbers, which have doubled in some UK universities. Previously, most such institutions focused on growing undergraduate numbers and harnessing the power and value of graduate students' contributions to research programs. Yet, universities perhaps did not appreciate an inevitable knock-on effect—namely, the creation of a new and extremely valuable employee, the postdoc.

Postdocs matter. As a group, they are characterized by passion, dedication, vitality, their considerable abilities, and their drive. They truly merit further support in their career development because they make a difference to universities and the world itself—not just in research terms but also as potential global leaders in wide-ranging and diverse fields. The research they carry out addresses many global challenges faced today, from creating cancer treatments to helping those living in extreme poverty to access education, clean water, and basic health treatments.

In practice, however, the postdoctoral phase of most early-researchers' careers is dominated by short-term contracts and job insecurity, which affect the individuals, the institutions that struggle to retain valuable staff, and funders whose resources may not be used efficiently. Another downside is that less than 20% can have careers within academia because of the limited number of positions. The majority must move into other areas including industry, finance, entrepreneurship, and the public

sector. Despite their enormous career potential, postdocs need deeper and more complex opportunities while still employed by their universities to achieve their personal potential. Such experiences could have major impacts in their chosen careers. Therefore, universities must engage more actively with their own postdocs and meet this need.

As an example, the University of Cambridge, with 4000 postdocs, has introduced wide-reaching resources over the past 4 years to improve well-being, guidance, and professional development support for its postdoctoral community—including establishing three dedicated postdoctoral centers. The university's Office of Postdoctoral Affairs partners with postdoc-led initiatives such as the Postdocs of Cambridge Society, which is organizing the National Postdoc Meeting with local and national support.

Another new approach initiated by the University of Cambridge is to work with UK national funding bodies to better support the postdoc community. A key outcome has been to develop transformational leadership and entrepreneurship programs. For example, a recent pan-Europe initiative involves five

other European Union universities and six leading global industrial partners in a shared vision to improve postdoc support with other higher education institutions and industries across Europe. Industries recognize that this also will assist them to innovate, grow, and respond better to fast-changing global markets.

Clearly, there are many other issues pertaining to the employment and working conditions for postdocs that must be addressed. Postdocs are mostly young people who are passionate about what they do, put in long hours with determination to succeed, and most definitely should not be taken for granted. So a key first step for universities and funding bodies is to expand support, resources, and attention for their postdocs. We all know change takes time, but for postdocs, changes must be implemented sooner rather than later.

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