

The Postdoctoral Experience at Cambridge

A report by the Postdocs of Cambridge (PdOC) Society

Overview

In November 2016, the Vice-Chancellor asked the Postdocs of Cambridge (PdOC) Society to prepare a report on the experiences of postdoctoral research staff at Cambridge. This report draws on responses collated from an anonymous online survey circulated to subscribers of the PdOC mailing list between January and February 2017 as well as the experiences of the 16 members of the PdOC Society Committee. Open-ended questions allowed long form responses where respondents could articulate and develop their replies freely.

There was a wide range of respondents across the University and its Partner Institutions with the Schools of Biological Sciences (SBS), Clinical Medicine (SCM), Technology (ST) and Physical Sciences (SPS) strongly represented, broadly reflecting the School affiliations of research staff within the University as a whole. There were 60 responses in total. Over half of the respondents had been postdocs at Cambridge for less than three years, 20% for less than one year while 16% had been postdocs at Cambridge for 5 –10 years or longer. Some quotations included have been edited for clarity and with every quotation the respondent's School and time at Cambridge is given.

Arriving in Cambridge: A Place to Live

Many postdocs find seeking accommodation in Cambridge difficult, not only in terms of the expense, but also the lack of suitable places on offer for single people. These difficulties can be compounded for researchers with families or those arriving from overseas who are unfamiliar with the UK private rental sector. Many postdocs commute from outside the city which has a clear impact on their ability to optimally do their job and sometimes causes isolation from Cambridge life. The work of the Accommodation Service is appreciated but sometimes there are difficulties with communications. The North West Cambridge (NWC) development is seen as a positive move towards addressing a critical issue but concerns about eligibility for accommodation there are common.

"I found it extremely difficult to find affordable accommodation. It is pretty much impossible to live on your own except if you are willing to spend more than half of your salary on living costs only." - SBS, < 1 year

"(...) even after 4 years in Cambridge, finding accommodation was a very stressful process with the lack of university accommodation for single postdocs, the reduced offer

from the Accommodation Service, and the high probability of scam using other websites (I got scammed and lost hundreds of pounds).” – SPS, 2-3 years

“...hopefully NWC will go some way to responding to that issue as far as postdocs are concerned. However, I do not see the logic of being told for several years that measures were being taken to help us if we just were patient and then when it (NWC) does arrive being told that priority is for newcomers.” – SBS, 2-3 years

The Cambridge Welcome: Introductions & Inductions

Postdoctoral life can be a challenging experience, even for those who were previously students at the University. The city is overall thought of as a welcoming place by new researchers. The early contact made with new postdocs by University bodies such as the PdOC Society, the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPdA), and Newcomers and Visiting Scholars (NVS) is welcomed. Much of the perception of the institution as a whole hinges on early impressions formed in departments shortly after arrival. Views of departmental inductions vary from “excellent” to “basic” to “useless”. The style of the University induction for postdocs has been revamped and now provides pertinent information for researchers and is valued by new research staff. This represents a positive step. However, the University website for new staff could be improved.

“Although the induction was good from my line manager, the departmental induction was haphazard - I wasn't told who to contact for administrative things (e.g. access cards), and wasn't shown around the main departmental site (mostly I work at a secondary site at Addenbrooke's).” – SBS, 2-3 years

In recent years, the OPdA has undertaken a comprehensive reform of postdoctoral inductions, this is appreciated by newly arrived researchers, and noticed by longer term postdocs as an improvement.

“I initially felt quite isolated as I was effectively left to my own devices the majority of the time, however I did attend an [OPdA] induction in town which I found to be very good and made me feel a lot more welcome. This was the first time I actually felt like I was part of the university.” – SCM, 2-3 years

Collegiate Cambridge

Postdocs who become members of colleges find being fully immersed in that type of community greatly rewarding, particularly in access to opportunities for teaching. Postdocs show firm interest in joining a college but despite several moves by Colleges and the OPdA, barriers to joining remain. Joining colleges can rely on personal Cambridge connections which most postdocs lack. A principal issue concerns some Colleges placing the eligibility requirement for applicants to hold funding for a specific amount of time, usually at least two years, at the time of appointment, which excludes many postdocs.

“I would recommend becoming a member of a college to other postdocs, although I know that there are not many places available for postdocs currently.” – SBS, 2-3 years

“Involvement in a college gave me a feeling of being involved in the full life of the university. I have been lucky to choose a college which puts on family events. Colleges have to invest relatively little in postdoc affiliates, and they gain a great deal - this should be extended so colleges take on as many postdocs as possible.” – SPS, 2-3 years

"I became a Postdoctoral affiliate... since then my feelings about life in Cambridge have heightened a lot." – SCM, 2-3 years

"More could be done to further widen the inclusion of postdocs to collegiate life without necessarily pursuing the fellowship route. More colleges should offer affiliation memberships and ideally, these fees should be included in the overheads of postdoc employment so that all postdocs have college affiliation." – SPS, 2-3 years

"However, I am disappointed with the way the Colleges treat postdocs. It is very difficult to have an affiliation to them (except for a single College that I know of, Clare Hall). (...) I have been in Cambridge for more than two years but my contracts have always been shorter than this period (and have been extended) so I am not eligible to apply to Junior Research Fellowships." – ST, 2-3 years

Achieving Excellence: Supporting Postdoctoral Researchers at Cambridge

The postdoc community is very happy that the University takes seriously its role in supporting postdoctoral researchers. The expansion of the Personal and Professional Development (PPD) programme alongside the Researcher Development Programme (RDP) provides postdocs at Cambridge access to a wealth of training opportunities. The Careers Service is a particularly important resource for both those pursuing careers inside and outside academia after the end of their contracts. However, there is a feeling that further effort should be made to help retain research staff. The ability to take up opportunities for career development is understood to be vital, but can be difficult to realise owing to time pressures, and the heavy reliance upon cooperation with researchers' Principle Investigators (PI) or line-managers.

"At the moment, I believe the University is giving enough advice to the postdoc but not enough pressure on the established PI to make some space for young investigators." – SBS, 5-10 years

"There are a lot of PPD courses available, and I have taken some of these. In general, my PI is not very supportive of me going to these during standard working hours (9-6pm), so I have decided not to go to a few which I was interested in." – SBS, 2-3 years

"I aim to stay in research and one day have my own group. In my experience, there are many useful courses that have, and will in the future, help me effectively achieve this goal. PPD is excellent for Cambridge University postdocs." – SCM, 2-3 years

"Not enough career planning on my and the employers side. Had the impression that promoting postdoc career progression is not in the interest of the employer." – SCM, 5-10 years

"I have found the PPD at Cambridge second to none. The PPD service provides excellent, relevant support to postdocs. I find it refreshing that the careers service here places a lot of emphasis on careers outside academia" – SCM, 4-5 years

"The career options for non-clinical biomedical science postdocs are limited so despite conducting high quality research, dedication and putting in very long hours, the postdoc years can seem wasted in the end as people have to move to alternative careers apart

from the very few that can become PIs. This is also sadly a loss/waste of valuable experience for the departments." – SCM, 5-10 years

"Access to PPD is limited in my group due to the group leaders position against training in general. After 6+ years in the same group I've never had an appraisal. I now feel there is no place for me in research as I do not wish to become a group leader and "postdoc for life" positions do not exist, or only unofficially and are therefore very risky. It's a shame given the level of expertise we can reach. I have also never received support from my PI or department to look at alternative careers. Not only do I need to be proactive about it but often have to hide it from them." – ST, 5-10 years

Teaching

The majority of postdocs are contracted to undertake research only but for those aiming for careers in academia – especially at non-UK institutions, teaching experience is increasingly necessary in an ever more competitive job market. The nature of undergraduate teaching at Cambridge provides researchers with limited opportunities for lecturing. Teaching via supervisions is the most common manner in which postdocs at Cambridge can gain teaching experience.

"Teaching opportunities are very much dependent on the PI and generally not ideal for research postdocs; there can be active discouragement from college supervisions or other teaching because of teaching being considered "a waste of time" and "being paid to do research, nothing else". This attitude leads to a catch 22 where lack of teaching experience post-PhD on a CV does not help to move towards teaching positions." – SCM, 5-10 years

"I had an interview for a lectureship and was told I needed more teaching experience. I had an appraisal and brought this up and was again told to ask within the department. I have and still haven't got any teaching experience. So, despite me continually requesting something that I have proof needs to be improved to enhance my lectureship chances I haven't had any help in obtaining the required experience." – SPS, 5-10 years

"The only downside is that I am quite isolated in my hidden lab at Addenbrooke's, and I miss doing things like outreach activities and teaching. I have applied for many different college affiliations, and apply yearly to the outreach training course, but sadly I am never successful!" – SCM, 2-3 years

"...as an outsider, I have found it virtually impossible to access the college system and my supervision opportunities have been limited to Part II student projects. This lack of direct teaching opportunities is the only downside to working in Cambridge." – SCM, 4-5 years

"I have not been involved in teaching but would like to be. I would be concerned to ask my PI for this time out of the study however, to teach. I am also completely unclear as to how I would go about teaching. I went to the induction but still felt this was unclear." – SCM, < 1 year

"I do not necessary feel that connected to the college and teaching aspects of the university - coming in as an outsider I have found it virtually impossible to access the college system and my supervision opportunities have been limited to Part II student projects. This lack of direct teaching opportunities is the only downside to working in Cambridge." – SCM, 4-5 years

Isolation & Integration

Life as a postdoctoral researcher can be isolating and the short-term nature of contract research can make fitting into a large institution such as Cambridge hard. These factors contributed to the establishment of the PdOC Society in 2001 to help bring together disparate researchers, spread throughout the University, and foster a collective community, to ensure postdocs have access to relevant information, and to networking opportunities. Since the founding of the PdOC Society, the number of contract research staff in the University has increased substantially.

The University has further enhanced the standing and recognition of postdocs by the establishing the OPdA in 2013 as the lead University body relating to the postdoctoral community – one of the first of its kind in the UK. It is acknowledged that the scattered geography of the University can make taking events and workshops in the city centre difficult for researchers on the Biomedical Campus, the opening of the Postdoc Centre on the Addenbrooke's site helps address this.

"I think becoming immersed and involved in University life is paramount to postdocs seeing their roles not just as 'another job' but as a place they fully identify with and become involved in. They then are likely to continue into other roles in the University." – SCM, < 1 year

"Life for researchers on contract is quite tough. More established researchers with funding can exploit researchers on short-term contracts. There is little will to help contract researchers establish their own funding streams." – SCM, 4-5 years

"I've had a tough experience during my pregnancy and return from maternity leave, hence my wish to leave research now. I have always been strongly discouraged by my PIs to get involved in any teaching as it didn't agree with their agenda, and I now feel this is lacking from my CV." – ST, 5-10 years

The Postdoc Society was praised for its work and activities in community building among postdocs, and there is the belief by longer term postdocs that things have changed for the better.

"I think the postdoc Society has been hugely beneficial. Without their newsletters and events, I would feel completely lost in this new town, with no real ties. I tried to go out with a friend to meet others, and quickly became acquainted with Cambridge's cliquey nature. You have to know 'someone' to know someone." – SCM, < 1 year

Concluding Remarks

Postdoctoral researchers place immense value on being a part of the University of Cambridge, and endeavour to make the most of their time here knowing that it will likely only be for a limited period. There are challenges specific to Cambridge such as housing costs, college affiliations and access to independent funding. Researchers can feel invisible amongst the wider Cambridge community, but are aware and appreciate that the University is strongly committed to its postdocs and is taking steps to improve matters for research staff at Cambridge.