

University of Cambridge
PdOC Society and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs
Departmental Postdoc Committee Chairs' Network

“Access to Personal and Professional Development Opportunities”

The DPCCN has identified “*postdocs have access to personal and professional development opportunities*” as a key priority for 2015/16. This priority was addressed at the termly meeting in October 2015, which was attended by representatives of 25 departmental postdoc committees (appendix 1).

The network already has a good understanding of the issues and challenges affecting postdocs and access to PPD opportunities. This is based on previous discussions of the DPCCN and from the rolling review of RD provision across the University (extract of **RDC.15.05**, appendix 2).

Desired Outcome:

- Gain a better understanding on how postdocs currently assess and meet their researcher development needs.
- Generate ideas from the postdoc community on how the University could better support identification and provision for RD needs.

Consultation:

Members were given background materials on Researcher Development at Cambridge and asked to reflect on the questions outlined below.

1. How do you decide on which course(s)/training opportunities to attend during the year?

The majority of attendees self-assess their own researcher development needs. **In order of frequency** the following sources of information are used as part of their self-assessment.

- (1) general ‘gut’ feeling that course would be useful
- (2) Recommended by a postdoc colleague
- (3) Other* (see below)

- (4) Informal encouragement by line manager
- (5) Recommended by Careers advisor
- (6) Formal encouragement by line manager (via SRD)
- (7) Encouraged by mentor

Note: (1), (2) and (3) are significantly larger than (4)-(7)

Other* includes information gained by 2 main approaches

Firstly, a proactive approach. Training courses are sought in response to

- funding body grant application criteria,
- information provided in ‘further particulars’ of jobs and outcome of job interviews
- a prerequisite for some teaching
- self assessment using Vitae RDF

Secondly, a reactive approach. Training courses are booked in response to effective and timely

¹ Personal and professional development opportunities refers to the complete topic of ‘Researcher Development’ and not simply courses and opportunities offered via PPD.

publicity via email newsletters and bulletins e.g. “if the course looks interesting/entertaining and I have time in my diary I book it”.

2. Do you use any type of development framework or information about career pathways to plan your development?

Attendees were aware of a number of potential formal ‘frameworks’ that were available. However, there is little evidence that these are used in a strategic manner. These include Vitae RDF, MRC personal development plan, information from IMechE, IChemE, IOP, CSci

More commonly, development gaps were identified via

- grant/fellowship/job application forms
- comparison with peers and successful postdocs
- external advice – SRD, Careers

3. What would you advise the University to put in place for you to assess your training needs?

It is recognized that the postdoc population is a large and very diverse group with differing levels of experience and potential career paths. However, there was a very clear message that the development and promotion of resources for postdocs to proactively assess and meet their own training needs is needed. The following general themes emerged.

(a) Core value skills

Develop a set of core value skills that all researchers should develop as part of their postdocs in Cambridge. Ensure that adequate training/opportunities are provided for postdocs to develop these core skills. Advertise effectively via a central listing of all courses and opportunities, which is searchable by the core values.

(b) Personalised skills analysis

Opportunity for postdocs to have personalised skills analysis to determine skill level and identify gaps. This could be completed either as a self-assessment exercise, part of SRD, via a Careers Service appointment, via a mentor or peer-to-peer support (note that peer recommendation was a significant factor in attendance at training courses).

(c) Use of Staff Review and Development

Use the Staff Review and Development (SRD) process to identify and collate postdoc training needs. As part of SRD postdocs should identify and record training and development needs. The DPCCN would recommend that anonymised data, on training and development needs be extracted from the SRD process and fed directly into RD and PPD provision. However, it was recognized that completion of SRD was patchy and hence provision of resources to self-assessment would be necessary.

(d) Self-assessment resources

Finally, there was an overall desire to have clearer guidance on useable self-assessment resources to enable postdocs to assess their own skills and plan future skills development in a more strategic manner. These resources would not only be useful for self-assessment but they could also facilitate conversations between postdocs and their line-manager. Practical resources could include criteria extracted from

- range of fellowship/grant criteria
- further particulars for non academic vacancies

Appendix 1 - Attendees of the Departmental Postdoc Committee Chairs' Network 22 October 2015

Department	Name	Email
Archaeology and Anthropology	Robyn Veal	rjv33@cam.ac.uk
Babraham Institute	Clara Novo	Clara.Novo@babraham.ac.uk
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Chemical Engineering	Claire Michel	chmm2@cam.ac.uk
Chemical Engineering	Krish Mahbubani	ktam2@cam.ac.u
Chemistry	Mike Casford	mtlc2@cam.ac.uk
CIMR	Thomas Masters	tam55@cam.ac.uk
Clinical School/Epidemiology	Helen Brown	heb56@medschl.cam.ac.uk
Computer Laboratory	Alice Hutchings	ah793@cam.ac.uk
CRUK	Deanna Patmore	Deanna.Patmore@cruk.cam.ac.uk
Engineering	Pieter Desnerck	pieter.desnerck@eng.cam.ac.uk
Genetics	Lisa Hülsmann	lcn27@cam.ac.uk
IMS	Jacek Mokrosinski	jm972@medschl.cam.ac.uk
Materials Science	Paul Coxon	prc39@cam.ac.uk
Music	Matthew Machin-Autenrieth	mm2085@cam.ac.uk
Music	Ananay Aguilar	aa752@cam.ac.uk
PDN	Helena Khaliullina	hk402@cam.ac.uk
PdOC President	Maya Ghossaini	mg458@cam.ac.uk
Physics	Paul Bennett	wpb22@cam.ac.uk
Plant Sciences	Katrin Geisler	kg404@cam.ac.uk
Primary Care Unit (IPH)	Joanne Emery	jle40@medschl.cam.ac.uk
Psychology	Nicole Horst	nh382@cam.ac.uk
Radiology	Josh Kaggie	jk636@cam.ac.uk
Social Anthropology	B. Poleykett	bp356@cam.ac.uk
Stem Cell Institute	Maria Barreira Gonzalez	mb2001@cam.ac.uk
Veterinary School	Anaid Diaz	ad634@cam.ac.uk
Zoology	Dom Cram	dc593@cam.ac.uk
Secretary	Joy Warde	joy.warde@admin.cam.ac.uk
Chair	Tariq Masood	tm487@cam.ac.uk
Head of OPdA	Karina Prasad	karina.prasad@admin.cam.ac.uk

Note: a current list of the chair or other rep from each department committee can be found at <http://www.pdoc.cam.ac.uk/dpcen>

Appendix 2 – Agenda and pre-reading for the Departmental Postdoc Committee Chairs’ Network 22 October 2015

University of Cambridge
**PdOC Society and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs
Departmental Postdoc Committee Chairs’ Network**

6-8pm Thursday 22 October 2015

“Access to Personal and Professional Development Opportunities”

At the last meeting of the DPCCN in May 2015 the network identified “*postdocs have access to personal and professional development opportunities*” as a key priority for 2015/16. We already have a good understanding of the issues and challenges affecting postdocs and access to PPD opportunities. This is based on previous discussions of the DPCCN and from the rolling review of RD provision across the University (see below for more details).

Outcome: Better understanding on how postdocs currently assess and meet their RD needs. Generate ideas from the postdoc community on how the University could better support identification and provision for RD needs.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you decide on which course(s)/training opportunities to attend during the year?
E.g. encouraged by PI/mentor, results of staff review, gut feeling, course ‘looks interesting’.
2. How do you judge how to use your time effectively?
how many days per year you devote to your personal development through training courses?
3. Do you use any type of development framework or information about career pathways to plan your development? Would this be useful for you?
e.g. an example of a framework used across the UK is the Vitae Researcher Development Framework <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/rd-related/introducing-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework-rdf-to-employers-2011.pdf>
4. What would you advise the University to put in place for you assess your training needs?
Be as creative as possible. This is not a simple problem to address so all suggestions are welcome.

BACKGROUND READING

A review of Researcher Development provision across the University is currently underway. This review is led by the Researcher Development Committee.

Researcher Development is designed to provide added value to the personal and professional development of researchers by educating researchers in areas that are not normally explicitly covered in their day to day working environment. This would include

- The need to take responsibility for one’s own career development and formulate a strategic plan.

- Communication skills: written and verbal, formal and informal (including networking and teaching in a discipline-specific and general context).
- Working with others: teamwork, leadership, management (including self-management) and entrepreneurship.
- Selling: selling a research proposition to get funding, applying for jobs.
- Material that is specific to location or discipline: specific knowledge that is of value for people working in Cambridge (including induction and making effective use of the staff review system); transferable skills that are relevant to the academic discipline of the researcher.

Researcher Development is provided at central level (e.g. Personal and Professional Development and the Careers Service) as well as delivery at School and departmental level.

A series of small postdoc focus groups have already been held earlier this year to get an insight into the views and experiences of postdocs and identified the following issues.

OUTCOME FROM POSTDOC FOCUS GROUPS (taken from RDC.15.05)

The groups were asked to reflect on their experiences with researcher development education at the University of Cambridge and in particular to reflect on issues in relation to the relevance and accessibility of this type of education. In their final round of discussions the focus groups were asked for suggestions on practical measures and/or initiatives that would make the current delivery more relevant to the respective target group, facilitate better access and increase participation.

The participants of all focus groups strongly agreed that researcher development education is vital to career advancement. In summary, the key issues that emerged from these discussions included the following:

- Soft transferable skills training deserved special attention both in terms of optimising the provision by including interactive and on the job training components and by facilitating better access. The terminology needs to be changed given that the term “soft transferable skills” does not resonate well with the target group and those who need to provide their support.
- Acknowledging career pathways, identifying related competencies and structuring the curriculum accordingly was highly recommended.
- Early access to guidance from career counsellors would be valuable in developing a good understanding of the various career options and would assist in identifying career development needs early on. This would allow for timely follow up through a tailored professional development plan.
- Key barriers to participation included:
 - Lack of support from the PI and lack of leverage of the postdoc (in particular an issue in relation to soft skills training and induction events). It should be noted that the OPdA has recently taken on responsibility for postdoc induction events and HR have agreed to make these events mandatory to attend.
 - Physical barriers to participation when postdocs are based in West Cambridge or at the Addenbrooke’s site.
 - Course eligibility criteria for teaching courses that are formulated as such that they exclude people on the basis of the duration of their postdoc, e.g. if it is only a one year position and on the basis of no prior experience.
 - Communication of the offerings and available courses; in that it is often not clear to the recipient which provision is relevant to them at which part of their career and where it is being delivered.
 - There is a recurring problem with courses that are oversubscribed that is an issue for both postdocs and doctoral students.
- Postdocs could be given more leverage in discussions with their PI’s if they had a contractual entitlement and a certain number of allocated days allowing them to participate in researcher development education.

- In relation to the previously identified gaps in provision (i.e. Ethics and Integrity, Grant writing, Financial Management and IP and Impact) the participants agreed that formal training in these areas would be of importance to them.
- A further significant gap in delivery highlighted by the focus group discussions is teaching training. There was strong agreement that the current provision is lacking in the area of lecturing education and training. This is a serious issue for many postdocs given that this type of experience is instrumental to their successful career advancement.
- Other suggestions included a properly embedded mentoring programme and a leadership programme that would be broadly accessible to all postdocs. The mentoring programme, provided that the mentors are properly trained, could fill an important void in postdoc career development and support.