

PdOC Society and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs

Departmental Postdoc Committee Chairs Network

A Guide to Establishing a Postdoc Committee

The aim of this guide is to support and facilitate **postdocs** in establishing Departmental 'Postdoc Committees'. It is a starting point to help you, as a postdoc, to get a Postdoc Committee up and running in your department. It includes advice on the general principles of setting up a group but is not prescriptive. As you know the University is a complex organisation consisting of over 100 departments and so one size will not fit all.

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1. What is a Departmental Postdoc Committee?

A Departmental Postdoc Committee is a group of postdocs working together to represent the views of postdocs on a range of issues. The issues will relate directly to the experiences and professional development of postdocs within the context of their Department or University Partner Institution (UPI). This group is also very likely to organise networking events for postdocs.

A list of established postdoc groups within Cambridge can be found on <http://www.pdoc.cam.ac.uk/dpccn> . It may be useful to contact members of established groups in departments that resemble your own in structure or field of interest, as they may be able to give specific advice to help you avoid troublesome 'teething' problems or to facilitate the formation of a new committee in other ways.

2. What are the primary benefits of having a Postdoc Committee?

A Postdoc Committee can:

- bring together the postdoc and research community in your department
- give a 'voice' to the postdocs
- facilitate communication between postdocs and department
- inform the postdoc community about opportunities for personal and professional development

- enrich the postdoc experience across the department and the wider University
- engage with the wider University structure

3. Why should I get involved?

There are many reasons that should motivate postdocs to get involved in a Postdoc Committee:

- You can meet and spend time with other postdocs in the department
- You can directly influence the programming that is provided for postdocs
- You can get experience working on and/or chairing a committee, which is something you will most likely be expected to do later in academic (or non-academic) professions
- You can get to know members of academic or administrative staff (within your department or across the University) with whom you might not have otherwise had reasons to interact; these sorts of networks can be invaluable and the ability to form them will stand you in good stead in your future career
- You will get a better appreciation for how the University operates and therefore be in a better position to get the most out your time here or to implement change

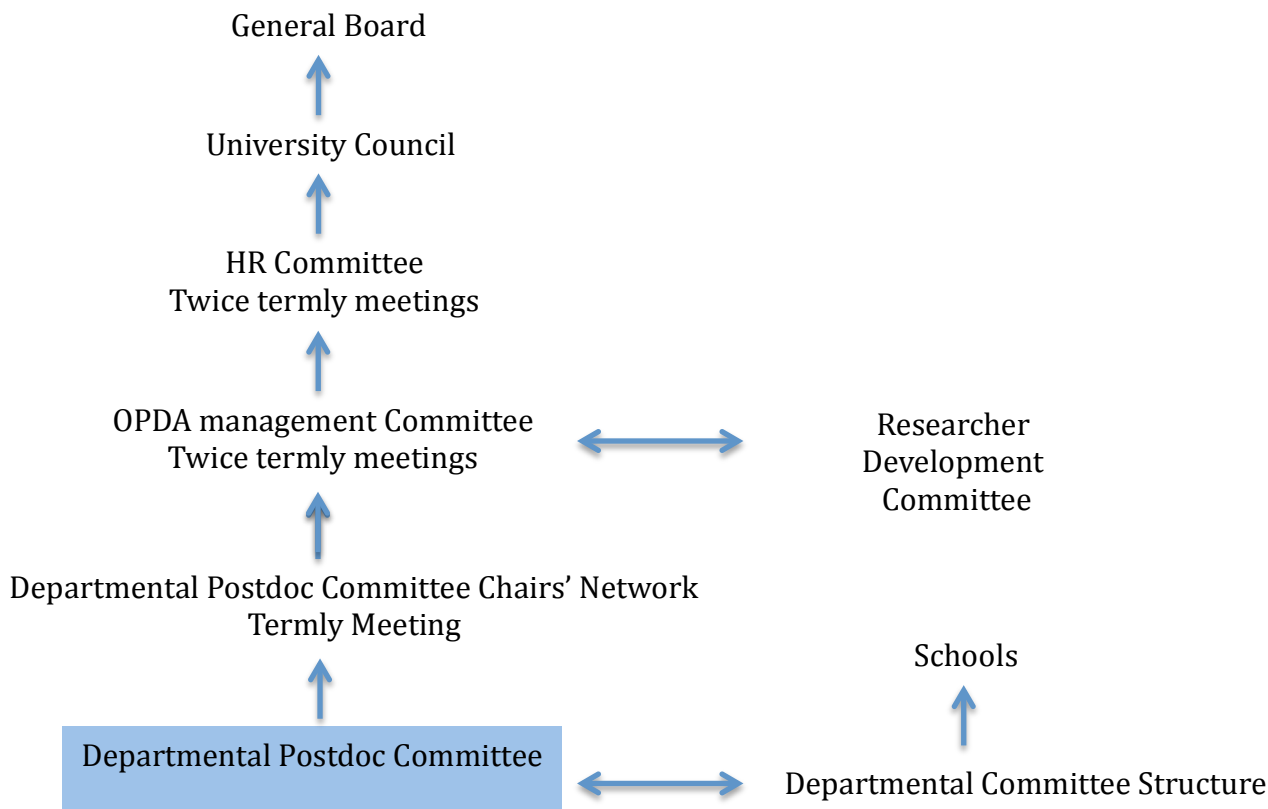
4. Why should the Department support the formation of a Postdoc Committee?

It is also important to consider the motivation(s) for your Department to engage with and support the Postdoc Committee. Your Postdoc Committee will be most effective if you understand how your department works and how decisions are made. How will you encourage the department to actively engage with the Postdoc Committee? An active Postdoc Committee will allow your Department to

- Increase postdoc engagement, increase postdoc well-being and ultimately productivity.
- Find out what postdocs think. This Committee should ideally be an official mechanism to hear the postdoc voice.
- Provide practical support to postdocs e.g. your Committee could welcome and contribute to inductions for new postdocs etc.
- Provide representatives to sit on other departmental committees.
- Find out the professional development needs of the local postdoc community. This could shape how 'Researcher Development' is provided in the Department.
- Demonstrate best practice as an employer adding value through staff development.
- Implement Concordat principles / Athena Swan agenda

5. How will your postdoc committee feed into the decision-making processes of the University?

In addition to feeding into the committee structure within your own Department, the chair (or other representative) from each Department Postdoc Committee meets on a termly basis. The Departmental Postdoc Committee Chairs Network (DPCCN) is chaired by the PdOC society and will report to the OPDA Management Committee.



6. Before you start, consider the following

- What is your personal drive behind setting up the group? What do you hope this Committee will achieve? (over what timescale?).
- Find out how decisions are made in your department. What is the committee structure in your department?
- How are postdocs currently represented in your department? Which committees contain a postdoc? This will vary from Department to Department and might not be widely publicised in your department. Ask around.
- Can you identify a postdoc 'Champion' at the senior management level and in Departmental administration in your department? This will be someone who can advise you on how the department works and how you can be most effective, and who is sympathetic towards postdoc issues.
- Find out who is responsible for 'Researcher Development' (used to be called Transferrable Skills or Roberts Funding). This could be based in the Graduate Office for the Department. Your department has access to 'Researcher Development' funding for training and skills development of its researchers, including postdocs.

Don't forget ...

You are a volunteer with a demanding postdoc position. Be realistic about what you can achieve. Ask your colleagues for help.

7. Practical first steps

- (1) Get a group of enthusiastic, organised postdocs together. This often happens in an adhoc fashion in the first instance. Ask your research office and/or departmental administrator to suggest names. Don't just stick to your own social/academic circle. Try to include postdocs from all areas of your department e.g. postdocs from different buildings, different research groups, different career stages.
- (2) Identify a postdoc 'Champion' at the senior management level and in Departmental administration in your department? This will be someone who can advise you on how the department works and how you can be most effective, and who is sympathetic towards postdoc issues. Invite them to sit on your postdoc committee. They will be an invaluable source of information and help you navigate the admin processes of your department.
- (3) Define the objectives and the terms of reference for your Postdoc Committee. It's worth spending time on this at the start. Gather opinions from as many different people as possible. Who are the postdocs in your Department? What are their needs? What kinds of events/resources would be useful? What can a volunteer committee realistically deliver?
- (4) Decide on a structure/mechanism to manage the Committee. Will individuals within the Committee have specific roles (e.g., 'communication, 'organising events'), or will all members have the same general role with specific responsibilities for particular events? Who else can help? Is there a permanent member of staff who could advise the Committee? They will have a wealth of knowledge about the Department to share.
- (5) Communication. Establish a mechanism of spreading information to the postdocs in your Department. This will probably involve creating a postdoc mailing list which may already exist. Develop a relationship with the administrative staff in your department to access email lists of postdocs. Based upon experience of recently established Postdoc Committees, existing lists may be severely out of date, so be sure you have an accurate mailing list and someone to maintain it.
- (6) Organise your first 'event'! It can be very simple and don't expect every postdoc in your department to turn up. The initial aim is to bring the postdoc community together e.g. arrange an open meeting for all postdocs (over lunch works!) invite your Head of Department to address the group.
- (7) Survey your postdocs to find out what they want to do? This could be done at your first event and followed up by email to maximise engagement. Once you have a clearer picture of the needs of your postdoc community you can develop and refine your objectives and activities.
- (8) Encourage your Head of Department and/or 'Champion' to increase postdoc representation on Departmental Committees. The Committee structure varies from Department from Department. Find out which Committees already have postdoc representation and which Committees should have postdoc representation.

(9) Finally, you've just got started but how are you planning to sustain the group? How can you attract in new faces with fresh ideas and enthusiasm each year? Have a limited time period for each role within the Committee e.g. a new chair is chosen every 2 years etc.

(10) Focus on defining 'action points' and progressing them: don't just talk! Good to find a mix of short-term achievable 'low-hanging fruit' and long-term 'visionary' goals.

8. Funding?

Your Postdoc Committee will need to seek funding for both the functioning of the Committee and also to deliver any events for postdocs. In the first instance it is worthwhile asking your department and/or School. Don't be afraid to ask BUT do have a credible plan for how much funding you think your Committee needs and a plan to allocate the funds. Be realistic! Funding for basic Committee work e.g. printing & the odd teas/coffees for meetings etc. should be available from your Department.

There is also a University Researcher Development Fund to support the learning and development of researchers for both your current research role and for your future career. The Researcher Development Fund is intended to support activities of 'added value' - that is, activities which contribute towards researcher development, and which would not ordinarily be offered in the normal course of your research work. Find out who is responsible for Researcher Development planning in your department. Your committee should directly influence what is offered to postdocs and most likely you can contribute to the planning of individual activities and skills training.

9. Potential challenges and possible solutions

Challenge	Possible Solution
Lack of engagement of postdocs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ownership of the group should be with you, the postdocs e.g. a postdoc chairs the group, arranges the meeting etc. - networking & social activities will be the glue to hold the group together. - get out there and talk to as many postdocs as possible e.g. departmental seminars, research away days, in the tea room! - survey the needs of the postdoc cohort
Time management of postdocs	<p>You are busy. Probably a fulltime researcher.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have clearly defined roles in your committee structure. - prepare for each meeting. This will save time and be more productive in the long run! - professional and timely communication - try not to have large group discussions via email.
Effectiveness of the group Is it really listened to?	<p>Find a senior academic in your department who will be a 'champion' for the group. They could</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attend meetings and provide advice/guidance - liaise with others in department - help you work out what is realistic within the context of your Department.
Long term sustainability of the group!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have 1 or 2 of permanent staff members as advisors for your committee. A Senior Research Associate (SRA) who knows the Department would

	<p>be useful contact and would know what has happened in the past and help you learn from that experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - think about how you will get fresh faces into the group each year. - have a plan for what to do when a postdoc leaves e.g. each postdoc could be responsible for finding their own successor.
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10. Need further help?

There are a number of people who can help you further. These include

The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs

www.opda.cam.ac.uk

The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPDA) is driving the University's vision with regards to issues relating to the postdoctoral community in the University. The OPDA provides an academic, administrative and pastoral focus for the community, developing and executing an agenda for change to enhance the physical and intellectual experience of postdocs in Cambridge and ensure the University meets or exceeds its obligations to this community. The OPDA can offer you support in the following ways:

- (i) providing information on University wide initiatives such as mentoring, review, College affiliation etc.
- (ii) providing contact points with other departmental postdoc committees
- (iii) providing administrative support through its Partner Volunteer Scheme where appropriate
- (iv) arranging for training for the chairs of the postdoc committees
- (v) advising the committees on funding sources e.g. RDC

Contact Karina Prasad, Head of the OPDA, for any enquiries at karina.prasad@admin.cam.ac.uk.

The Postdoc Centre @ 16 Mill Lane. This office is a central hub for postdocs. It offers a drop in information centre giving advice to postdocs and a set of meeting rooms which are available for postdocs to book (free of charge). For further information and booking email contact.opda@admin.cam.ac.uk or visit <http://www.opda.cam.ac.uk/aboutus/facilities/roombookings>

The Postdocs of Cambridge Society

The PdOC Society aims to bring the postdoc community together on both a social and intellectual level and improve postdoc representation with the University. Sign up to the PdOC newsletter at www.pdoc.cam.ac.uk for further information on upcoming events. The Society Committee can be contacted via pdoc@admin.cam.ac.uk

Careers Service postdoc advisors

<http://www.careers.cam.ac.uk/pdoc/>

The Careers advisors are able to offer specialist careers service for postdocs and research staff, which covers both academic research careers and other options. They also offer a comprehensive event programme for research staff. Contact the Careers advisors who will be more than happy to advise your committee on both careers and training needs.

Personal and Professional Development

<http://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/information-postdocsresearch-staff>

Sharon Saunders, is a Professional Development Consultant specifically for postdocs. She will be able to advise and point you in the right direction when you need any help with Researcher Development training.

Human Resources

For advice on HR related issues such as contracts, maternity/paternity rights etc. contact your Departmental Administrator or research office. Your school is also supported by a HR business manager. It might be useful to invite whoever is responsible for HR to a postdoc event. Find out how they can support you and answer questions from the postdocs.

In addition there are a number of existing Departmental Postdoc groups within Cambridge. These are listed at <http://www.pdoc.cam.ac.uk/dpccn> . The postdocs in these groups would be very happy to give you informal advice.

Chemistry Department PDAC

The Department of Chemistry is among the largest departments in the University of Cambridge. It employs around 240 postdocs over almost 60 individual research groups, which are in turn grouped into five broad Research Interest Groups (RIGs). The Chemistry PDAC was set up in the summer of 2012, and comprises one senior academic staff member, eight postdocs, and the Department's Welfare, Training and Development Adviser. PDAC reports directly to the Department's Staff Management Committee, alongside parallel committees representing academic staff, academic-related and assistant staff, and postgrads.

PDAC members also sit on other committees in and beyond the Department: this give PDAC a wider voice, while the experience of seeing how other committees operate is invaluable in helping us become more effective in running PDAC. We don't have a formal system for postdocs becoming PDAC members: some were encouraged to be involved by their PIs; some volunteered out of interest; and more recently, some have joined as a result of talking to existing members. Happily, this *ad hoc* approach has produced a harmonious, cohesive and effective team.

PDAC meetings are held every two months, and last around two hours. As well as carrying out committee business, we invite a guest to each meeting to give us a short presentation on an important aspect of how things operate in Cambridge, followed by discussion. Guests so far have included key members of the administration team within Chemistry, and representatives of PPD, the Human Resources Division, and Cambridge Enterprise. Everyone that we have approached so far has been very willing to talk to us, and the interactions have been highly informative.

In its first year or so, PDAC has been closely involved in three key areas relevant to postdoc life in Chemistry: setting up a mentoring scheme; the staff review and development (SRD) process; and Athena SWAN. Real progress has been made in all three areas, including the launch of an improved SRD system for postdocs and the awarding of Athena SWAN Bronze status, with PDAC input making a real contribution. We have also successfully organised two predominantly social events, and run a series of informal monthly "meet the team" lunches; these events are advertised on our website and via Chemistry's postdoc email list. We are now aiming to establish a series of postdoc/industry networking events, and are engaging with the University's newly-appointed Director of Postdoctoral Affairs, Prof. Chris Abell, to explore fundraising opportunities to support postdoc activities.

In learning to function as a committee, one challenge that we have faced relates to engagement. Our remit is to represent the interests of *all* Chemistry postdocs t, but engaging with the whole postdoc cohort has so far proved difficult. To make progress, we have had to make decisions based primarily on the views of PDAC members. We need to do better at communicating PDAC activities to our peers and getting feedback, so that we can be sure that our views are truly representative. Perhaps the other biggest challenge is about self-empowerment. For contract research staff, it's easy to get trapped in the mindset that you can ask for things but it's up to "the management" to deliver, if you're lucky and "they" choose to. In reality – and this is true of any departmental committee – things only happen if the committee makes them happen. This means moving from discussion to agreed action points, and individual members taking ownership of driving these action points

forward between committee meetings. It is as we have taken that lesson on board that we have started to become effective as a committee.

Vital as self-empowerment is, empowerment by a department is also essential to a PDAC being effective. Our experience in Chemistry has been that PDAC is becoming accepted as a genuinely integrated body within the Department's committee structure, and is not seen as merely a token committee. In achieving this, the strong support of key senior members of academic staff – Prof. Chris Abell (who also heads a large research group in Chemistry); Assistant Head of Department Prof. Jane Clarke; and Head of Department Prof. Daan Frenkel – has been invaluable. The hard work and experience of our Welfare, Training and Development Adviser, Victoria Dawson, has also been essential to all of our achievements so far.

Stephen Driver, 25 October 2013.

Engineering Department PostDoc Committee- A Case Study

Background:

There are around 3,500 PostDocs in Cambridge from 91 countries. Around 50% of PostDocs are in receipt of an employment contract which has continued for 10 years and, in some cases, being appointed to a permanent position. It is recognised that PostDocs have received limited attention and have restricted participation in governance while they are key to Cambridge research and teaching. It was proposed at a Researcher Development Working group meeting in School of Technology that a Postdoctoral Researcher Committee would be formed at the Department of Engineering following the success of such committees at the Departments of Physics and Chemistry. Dr Susan Jackson (Researcher Development Coordinator) agreed to pursue the proposal with Philip Guildford (Director of Research), who in turn delegated the matter to Ms Lotta Kallioninen (Technician and Research Staff Resourcing Administrator). The idea was to set up a committee which would both organise training and career events for the postdocs at the Department, as well as make their voice heard in Departmental decision-making by allocating postdoctoral staff members to Departmental committees.

The Academic Committee and Faculty Board approved this idea, and additionally suggested the formation of a new Academic - Research Staff Joint Committee; this committee was to be chaired by the Deputy Head of Department for Teaching, co-chaired by the Chairman of the Postdoc Committee, and with one academic and one postdoctoral researcher from each Division as members. It was also proposed that the Co-Chairman of the Joint Committee would be co-opted to the Faculty Board to ensure that research staff had representation at the highest possible level.

Setting up Committee:

Dr Susan Jackson (Researcher Development Coordinator) invited 11 volunteers across six divisions to a meeting in order to form the 'Engineering Department PostDoc Committee'. Currently, the Postdoc Committee members have not been elected, but gathered from a pool of volunteers whose names were put forward at the initial stages of setting up the Committee by the Research Office, and by other sources. Co-option was the only way of kick starting the Committee but more democratic methods of electing the final committee will be undertaken in the future.

Current status:

The Engineering department is very supportive of this committee and has requested PostDoc representation on various departmental committees. Additionally, the department has initiated the process of inviting academics from six divisions to participate in this committee. We feel strongly that academic participation will make this committee more robust. As a new group we are currently working on the structure involving roles and responsibilities. Two events were organised in order to identify key focus areas on which to focus (in total about 120 Postdocs participated). The Committee aims to make a positive contribution to the professional and social life of the Engineering PostDocs. The committee is still evolving and we have received overwhelming response from the PostDoc community which suggests that the

decision to set up this committee is a step to towards building a desirable Engineering research environment at the University of Cambridge.