

# Careers intelligence: helping postdocs find jobs

Improving the career prospects of postdocs is now a priority of UK universities and research funders

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With analytical skills honed by a PhD and years working in their discipline, postdoctoral researchers might expect that they would be in high demand when applying for research roles outside academia.

But postdocs seeking a new challenge in industry, government or an academic-related role within universities can find it hard to make the transition. Exactly why remains a matter for intense debate; some blame employers for not recognising postdocs' abilities, while others say that universities and senior researchers are not doing enough to prepare postdocs for careers outside academia. Many wonder if postdocs should be more open and prepared for jobs beyond the academy.

With as many as nine out of 10 postdocs thought to move out of academia eventually, the sector appears to be waking up to the problem.

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“We have lived off our postdocs’ hard work within our universities without doing anything at all to help them,” said Anthony Hollander, pro vice-chancellor for research and impact at the [University of Liverpool](#), on the current lack of career support available to those doing much, if not the bulk, of the research in universities.

Helping employers understand the benefits of employing postdocs is a good place to start, Professor Hollander told the annual conference of Vitae, the UK organisation that leads on professional and career development for early career researchers, on 16 September.

From October, Liverpool will lead Prosper, a £4.4 million project backed by Research England, which aims to teach the “broader capabilities, attributes and mindset needed to thrive in multiple careers” to first-time postdocs at the N8 group of research-intensive universities. Working with Unilever, IBM and other employers, the scheme will develop tools and resources to help postdocs transfer their soft skills into industry to become “high-performing technical and business leaders”, said Professor Hollander.

The UK’s new researcher development Concordat, which requires institutions to provide opportunities for researchers to engage in a minimum of 10 days’ professional development a year, will provide more consistent support across the sector, said Universities UK president Julia Buckingham, vice-chancellor and president of [Brunel University London](#), who chaired the concordat strategy group.

Those institutions and funders who sign up to the concordat will need to submit annual statements explaining how they support the development of early career researchers, Professor Buckingham told the Vitae conference, adding that the new “central oversight...will move [the issue] up to ministerial level”.

Matthew Flinders, professor of politics at the [University of Sheffield](#), believed, however, that deeper problems in supporting postdocs lay elsewhere.

There is, said Professor Flinders, “an urgent need to upskill mid-career academics and professors” who were struggling to meet the needs of postdocs unable to secure a permanent academic job.

“I have been overwhelmed by the number of professors saying ‘I need support because the industry has changed structurally since I started’,” said Professor Flinders, a board member of the Economic and Social Research Council.

Expecting professors and researchers to advise on careers that they know little about would not help postdocs move into roles outside academia, said Jemima Ho, postdoctoral research associate at [King’s College London](#)’s Faculty of Dentistry, Oral and Craniofacial Sciences.

“There is not a reliable source of information about these careers as our supervisors do not know much about them and may be poor mentors themselves,” said Dr Ho, one of the organisers of the [Reshaping Postdoc Culture](#) conference, which was

attended by about 300 postdocs at [Queen Mary University of London](#) on 13 September.

Former postdocs who have successfully made the transition into industry may be better placed to advise, said Dr Ho. “But why would they want to come back and help others when they are obviously very busy themselves?”

“It is also unclear how to gain the skills to get these jobs and what the job will be like when you get there – no one really knows because we don’t speak that much to those in industry,” she added.

More work to track the careers of postdocs into industry would be useful because little is known about this group, suggested Dr Ho. At the Reshaping Postdoc Culture event, David McAllister, associate director for research and innovation talent at the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, admitted that postdocs were often “lost in the system”, with his council unable to say exactly who their postdocs are “even though 60 per cent of our funding goes on their salaries”.

Understanding postdocs’ career destinations would be beneficial for both researchers and employers, said Dr Ho, because “there is a huge market for people who are very knowledgeable in their area, but it is difficult for anyone moving sector to find the right role”.

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