

Research intelligence: helping postdocs find a voice

New rules will soon require UK institutions to listen to early career researchers. Jack Grove looks at how to engage a group often seen as hard to reach

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By Jack Grove
Twitter: [@jgro_the](#)



Source: Getty

At many universities, postdoctoral researchers outnumber permanent academic staff – often by a large margin. The [University of Cambridge employs](#) 4,200 contract researchers, more than double the 1,700 academics on its books, while the [University of Oxford's postdoc](#) population was close to 5,000 last year. But early career researchers have often found it hard to be heard within institutions.

In the UK, that situation may be about to improve thanks to the new Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, which will require signatories to “ensure that they [researchers] are formally represented” on career development matters. The concordat, [published](#) last month, will also oblige institutions to “set up processes for systematically and regularly gathering the views of researchers”. In short, universities will need to engage with postdocs more than ever.

Both in the UK and overseas, engagement is often channelled through a postdoc association. Running such a society is, however, a trick task, many organisers admit. With the clock ticking on their contracts, many postdocs are reluctant to devote time to social events or even career development activities, let alone advocacy groups, many report. Others shun such pan-university associations in favour of spending time with lab or departmental colleagues, or spouses and children – something that is generally not an issue with student clubs.

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“Because they are stressed and isolated, it is extremely difficult to bring them together in an association and convince their supervisors that [this] is not a waste of their precious time,” said Chiara Bruckmann, from Milan’s FIRC Institute of Molecular Oncology, whose guide to running a postdoc association, written with Endre Sebestyén, was published by [Plos Computational Biology](#) in 2017.

So how can postdoc societies engage early career research staff to ensure that their voice is properly heard?

Finding and recruiting postdocs

With postdocs moving between labs and universities, often at short notice, it can often be difficult to nail down exactly where staff are located. Different job titles, employers and funders also make it hard to identify possible members, too.

At Oxford, the college system complicates matter further, said Gwilym Rowlands, joint chair (voice) of the Oxford Research Staff Association. “We have postdocs in colleges who are quite separate from those in departments, and postdocs in departments with no affiliation to colleges,” said Dr Rowlands, a zoology postdoc. “We’ve tried to align our own representation system as much as we can to the university’s structures, so we have reps in colleges, departments and divisions.”

Recruiting as many reps as possible also helps to avoid overburdening volunteers, he added. “You don’t want all the knowledge and experience in the hands of one or two people, who will inevitably go elsewhere for another job,” said Dr Rowlands.

Hold regular and frequent events

While some postdocs may tire of constant invitations to quiz nights, country walks and cinema evenings, such social events are vital for a postdoc society, said Josh Kaggie, president of the Postdocs Society of Cambridge. “Consistent activities are more important than they seem,” said Dr Kaggie, a radiology postdoc. “Activities are where postdocs create bonds with each other, where issues can be discussed among peers, where resources can be pooled.”

He said that “constant recruitment”, as well as continual advertising and communication via social media and email lists, was also important. “The society can best represent postdocs when it simultaneously meets new postdocs and is also engaged with university panels, such as those for career services and human resources,” he added.

Don’t overlook postdoc skills

Few volunteer associations will boast the skills found in postdoc societies, so don’t hesitate to use them, said Dr Kaggie. “Postdocs who you meet are very engaged, skilled and

professional, and this means that you can get a lot done with [relatively] few...people,” he said. “It also means that you don’t have wild events that could cause concern,” he added.

Run career development events

Most postdocs will eventually leave academia – with many departing for better-paid, more secure research jobs in industry. But options beyond the academy are not always obvious for those wrapped up in their research, said Dr Bruckmann, who urges postdoc societies to take a lead in organising career development events. “You could invite successful alumni pursuing careers outside classic academic research to share their personal career paths and lessons,” she advised.

“These meetings enable postdocs to talk about their career plans, do professional development activities and, ideally, network with scientists who have completed a PhD but moved outside academia into the domains of industry, scientific publishing, technical sales, start-ups, teaching and academic support and so on,” she added.

In Italy and the UK, postdocs face the same pressing issues, Dr Bruckmann continued. “Postdocs have often moved from their home country, so they need friends; they are stressed by their projects, so they don’t have time to improve their soft skills; and they are usually not represented within institutes, so their needs are completely ignored – postdoc associations can play a big role in addressing all of these problems.”

jack.grove@timeshighereducation.com