



HOW TO GET A POSTDOC

What's a postdoc?

A postdoctoral research position is a fixed-term, paid position which usually involves working on a research project for which an academic (the Principal Investigator) has applied for funding. In some cases, it may be possible for you to have some input into defining the project or writing the grant application, but essentially the project will be defined by the PI. Once the PI has successfully obtained funding they will usually advertise for postdocs to work on the project.

A postdoctoral research position can be, though by no means has to be, a stepping stone on the route to an academic career. In science and engineering disciplines, the most common route into an academic career is via one or two (or possibly three) postdocs, possibly followed by a fellowship, and then a lectureship. In some Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines, it's increasingly common for people to do postdocs as part of the route to an academic career, though there is also the option of doing a teaching fellowship or temporary lectureship instead of, or possibly as well as, a postdoc, before applying to permanent lectureships. You should check the pathways with academics in your discipline.

Should I do a postdoc?

This is your decision, and, as with all career options, it's essential to do your research to make sure that you understand what postdoctoral research involves and to help you evaluate whether it is right for you. Often people 'end up' doing a postdoc because they haven't thought about career plans, and the opportunity for a postdoc comes up just as they are finishing their doctorate. While you can always gain valuable skills through doing a postdoc, there is the danger of getting into the habit of simply 'grabbing' at opportunities as they come up rather than investigating what you actually want to do.

A postdoc position provides the opportunity to enhance your specialist research skills and knowledge. If you are aiming for a long-term academic career, a postdoc will provide you with opportunities to develop your publication record, develop research collaborations and networks and potentially manage other researchers. If an academic career isn't your long-term aim, doing a postdoc can still enhance valuable transferable skills such as project management, people management and communication, as well as research-specific skills, and potentially offer opportunities for working with external partners. In short, a postdoc is worth considering if:

- You want an academic career.
 - You want to further explore whether an academic career is for you.
 - You want to pursue an area of research you are passionate about.
 - You want to expand your skills/knowledge in a particular research area.
 - You are interested in a career option where having a postdoc would be an advantage.
- As an example, the research councils employ researchers to manage and oversee grant applications, among other things, and may value postdoctoral experience. Talk to a careers adviser about whether a postdoc would be beneficial in areas you are considering.

How do I find a postdoc?

Here are the most popular vacancy sites for finding postdocs in the UK:

- www.jobs.ac.uk
- Times Higher Education Supplement - www.timeshighereducation.co.uk
- www.findapostdoc.com
- [Naturejobs.com](http://www.naturejobs.com), Science Careers (<http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org>) and New Scientist (www.newscientist.com) advertise postdoctoral positions in the sciences.

Sites for finding postdocs outside of the UK:

- www.findapostdoc.com – worldwide database of postdoc positions
- www.academicjobseu.com
- www.higheredjobs.com - US but has international vacancies
- US Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>) - US equivalent of the Times Higher Education Supplement
- [Naturejobs.com](http://www.naturejobs.com) and Science Careers (<http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org>) have academic research positions within science
- The National Postdoctoral Association has resources for postdocs wanting to work in the United States: www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/International

Finding postdoc positions that aren't advertised

If you limit yourself to applying for advertised vacancies, you may find that you miss out on the most suitable opportunities. In 2010, Vitae, an organisation that supports the career development of researchers, carried out a survey of doctoral students three years after graduation, and asked them how they had found out about their current jobs. Of those working in Higher Education research, 39.7% had found out about their jobs through professional, work or educational contacts, 27% found out about their job because they currently worked for or had previously worked for that employer, and 12.1% had found about their job through an advert in a magazine, newspaper or website (multiple responses were allowed).

If you would like to continue in the institution/research group where you did your doctorate, make sure that academics in your department know that you want to stay! Bear in mind, though, that there can be advantages to moving to another institution; see the Manchester academic careers website for more on this:

www.academiccareer.manchester.ac.uk/about/phdandbeyond/moving

Networking

Networking is key to building your academic profile, and can also be a vital strategy for finding postdocs that aren't advertised. Even for advertised vacancies, it's very common for academics to have someone in mind before the position is even advertised, and building your reputation and making contacts is the best way to increase the chances that the person they have in mind is you! So before you start looking for postdocs you will want to start building your profile through networking (online, at conferences and seminars), building collaborations and relationships with academics in your field, and starting to think about publications. Many early-career researchers feel daunted at the prospect of networking; check out these resources to give you some tips:

- The Careers Service's *Finding a graduate job* guide - www.bath.ac.uk/publications/finding-a-graduate-job-guide/
- *Grad student advice series: How to network and add value to yourself and others* - <http://thegradstudentway.com/blog/?p=548>

As you network with peers and senior academics, you may get to hear about where there may be opportunities coming up. If you are interested in pursuing research in a specific field, make sure you get to know the academics in that field. Ask your supervisor if they know of any academics working in the field whose research groups you could potentially join.

Speculative applications

Another strategy for finding postdocs that aren't advertised is to apply speculatively to academics you would like to work with. In practice this means sending your CV and a covering letter explaining who you are, what you can offer and asking to be considered as a researcher on the academic's future projects. It's often easier to send speculative applications to people you have already had some contact with, so take note of the above advice about networking. Speculative covering letters should be addressed to a named person.

Being included as a named postdoc on a grant

The final way to find a postdoc that isn't advertised is to be written into a grant application as a named postdoc. Again, this would require developing a relationship with a potential PI beforehand.

The application process

Applications for postdocs will usually consist of either an application form including a statement of your suitability and interest in the post, or a CV and covering letter.

Always remember, your application needs to be carefully targeted to the job you are applying for, so before you begin the application, do your research into:

- Yourself - skills, interests, achievements, research techniques.
- The project – what is it and why does it appeal to you.
- The research group – what have they worked on in the past, what have they published, expertise of group members.
- The department and university – areas of research specialisms, support available, strategies etc.

Whatever the format of the application process, your application will need to demonstrate that you meet the criteria outlined in the person specification and job description.

Academic CVs

Academic format CVs, unlike CVs for jobs outside of academia, can be as long as you need them to be. Typically academic CVs will include the following information/subheadings:

- Personal details
- Education
- Research experience/skills/interests
- Grants awarded
- Prizes
- Publications and conference presentations
- Teaching experience
- Public engagement and outreach
- Administration
- Referees (full names and contact details)

For further advice and some sample academic CVs, see www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/1373/Academic%20CVs

Covering letters

The purpose of a covering letter is to explain your motivation for applying for the job and to highlight the best points in your CV and the reasons that they make you the ideal candidate for that particular job. A covering letter for a postdoc would need to highlight the key aspects of your research experience and achievements and demonstrate enthusiasm for the project, the group and the department. Covering letters should be:

- Addressed to a named individual
- Printed on good quality white paper
- No more than one side in length.
- See also this e-book on writing cover letters for research jobs: www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/resources/ebooks-and-toolkits/how-to-write-a-cover-letter-for-research-jobs

Application forms and personal statements

You may be asked to complete an application form which includes a personal statement. The aim of the personal statement is to demonstrate that you have clear motivations for applying for the job and that you have the skills and experience given in the person spec and job description. Make sure your personal statement has a clear structure. It can be easiest to mention the criteria in the person spec one by one and provide clear, specific evidence for how you meet each of these criteria. Begin or end this with an explanation of why you want the job.

Top tips for application forms

- Save the form as you go along
- Save a separate copy of the form for your own records and interview preparation
- Don't use vague statements – "I have a bit more to publish from my PhD"
- Beware of the dangers of cutting and pasting.

Interviews

The exact format of interviews for postdocs will vary across institutions, departments and disciplines. In some cases interviews may constitute a semi-formal discussion with the PI of the project, but it is common these days for postdoc interviews to be more formal. You may well be interviewed by a panel of academics including the Principal Investigator of the project.

Preparation is always key to interview success. Before the interview, make sure you review your CV and covering letter, identify evidence to demonstrate that you meet the criteria on the person specification, and research the department, research group and university thoroughly. Questions will try to establish your enthusiasm for the project, your ability to carry out the research, your knowledge of the group and its research, and how well you would fit in with the current team.

Some sample questions for postdoc interviews:

- Tell us about your PhD
- Why do you want to work on this project?
- How has your PhD prepared you for working on this project?
- What plans do you have for publication?
- If you were doing your PhD again, what would you do differently?
- What are the three main findings of your PhD?
- What are your long term career aims and where does this position fit in?
- How do you feel about working independently?
- What experience have you had of working as part of a collaborative team?

Questions you could ask

Asking questions is a good way to demonstrate your enthusiasm, and can also help you to determine whether you want the job. Make sure you don't ask anything that's already stated in the job advert or that you should have researched beforehand. Possible areas for questions include:

- How often does the research group meet?
- Am I expected to get my own funding?
- How much contact will I have with the PI?
- What have postdocs from the lab gone on to do?
- What training/development opportunities are available for postdocs?

Interview presentations

You may be asked to give a short presentation as part of the interview. This may involve giving an overview of your doctorate and possibly talking about how it fits with the project you are applying for, or talking about your general suitability and motivation for the position. You may have to give the presentation in front of the interview panel or in a wider audience of researchers from the department. Try to find out beforehand who will be at the presentation – if there are people there who are outside of your research field you will want to avoid using overly-specialised language.

For more advice on interviews and presentations, see:

- www.vitae.ac.uk/researcher-careers/pursuing-an-academic-career/applying-for-academic-jobs/academic-job-interviews
- www.academiccareer.manchester.ac.uk/interviews/presentations

Additional support

For more information on academic and non-academic career options after the doctorate and vacancy sites, see www.bath.ac.uk/guides/careers-service-support-for-researchers/ If you would like to discuss your career options 1:1 or get advice or feedback on an application or interview process, book an appointment with a careers adviser www.bath.ac.uk/guides/careers-service-appointments/

Careers Service

August 2018

© University of Bath

This publication is available online at

www.bath.ac.uk/guides/list-of-careers-service-publications/

If you need this information in another format, please contact us.

www.bath.ac.uk/careers