

Progress Review 2013-2016

Office of Postdoctoral Affairs



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OPdA
Office of Postdoctoral Affairs

postdocs

A Cambridge research community



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Contents

1 About Us

OPdA Achievements to Date

- 2** Postdoc Centres
- 3** Activities and Events
- 4** Alumni Benefits
- 5** Entrepreneurial Postdocs of Cambridge
- 6** Researchers14
Induction
- 7** Communication
- 8** Departmental Postdoc Committees Network
- 9** Mentoring
College Affiliation
- 10** Volunteers

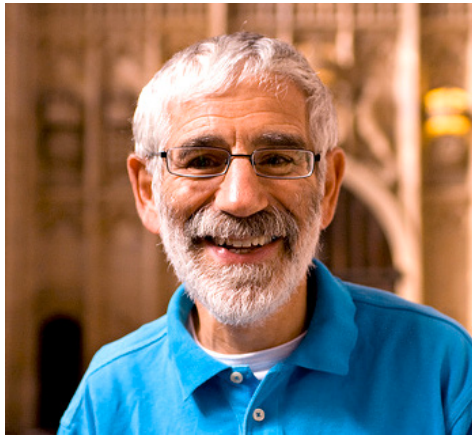
Looking Ahead: 2016 and Beyond - In Progress

- 11** Internships
- 12** European Community Collaboration (HEAPP)

Looking Ahead: 2016 and Beyond - Future Initiatives

- 13** Teaching Experience and Development
Leadership Courses
- 14** Destination Data
Fellowship Funded Postdocs
- 15** Partner Institutions
Governance

About Us



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The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs was initiated just three years ago in August 2013 by the Vice Chancellor who used his Endowment Fund to do so. Since its inception, the OPdA has worked closely with the pre-existing Postdocs of Cambridge Society (PdOC) and has had a significant impact on the well-being, recognition, on-going training and enhanced support of the University's contracted 3,000 postdoctoral research staff (the figure is closer to 4,000 if externally-funded and College Junior Research Fellows are included).

The funding, both to establish the OPdA and for its three Postdoc Centres, has been provided by University sources over the last three years. This reflects the extraordinary commitment by the University to develop, support, and broaden horizons as well as providing new opportunities for postdocs. It also reflects the considerable expansion of the University footprint across Cambridge and the exponential growth in numbers of early career research staff in recent years; there are currently some 45,000 in the UK of which there are approximately 4,000 in Cambridge alone.

The Progress Review 2013-2016 summarises all that has been achieved in the three years, including the commitment to the three Postdoc Centres (Mill Lane since May 2014, Biomedical Campus opening in September and NWC due to open in the late Spring 2017).

One aim for many of the new approaches initiated by the OPdA is to see them adopted, run by and thoroughly embedded in the University's established divisions in order to improve the support of staff more generally.

Achievements to Date

Postdoc Centres

The first Postdoc Centre was opened in May 2014 at 16 Mill Lane and immediately became an active and vibrant hub of activity, thereby meeting a significant need. The centre, the first of its kind in any university in the UK, was designed as a full service and free-for-use facility. Located in central Cambridge, it provides office spaces, meeting and seminar rooms, a library, and equally, social space for the postdoctoral community and their families. As well as being freely available, the facilities are used extensively by postdoc communities for academic and training purposes as well as regular social events and attendance. Usage continues to increase annually.

A second Postdoc Centre will open in September 2016 on the Biomedical Campus to support the 1,000 postdocs based there.



A third site will be open by June 2017 on the innovative North West Cambridge Development, a development with a strong commitment to community and support for key workers in terms of affordable housing and a viable and exciting infrastructure. By the summer of 2017 the OPdA will have three key strategic sites.

Activities and Events

Activities and events are the focal points for the centre and will expand with each new site. In 2014/15, the OPdA organised and developed a wide range of activities with a particular focus on entrepreneurship, mentoring, career development, research excellence and broadening the outlook of postdocs. These continually evolve.



External support also is increasingly a feature and recent events include (with input from those shown in parentheses):

- industry fora (BP and Schlumberger)
- interdisciplinary events (including strategic research initiatives)
- communications and impact events; research support career opportunities (Wellcome Trust and Royal Society)
- publishing (Cambridge University Press)
- academic and Nobel Laureate lecture series
- technology transfer and venture capital funding training (BP).

Alumni Benefits

The OPdA has worked closely with the Alumni Relations Office to ensure that postdocs now have a package of benefits after their departure, and as such they are recognised as alumni of the University.

Prior to 2014, postdocs were not recognised as alumni; no systematic records were kept in order to be able to maintain contact with them. Our joint work has culminated in the first UK University 'alumni benefits scheme,' launched in June 2014 and there have been increasing efforts to collect 'destination data' (see below).



The alumni benefits scheme take-up has been adopted by almost 80% of those contacted. This has considerable impact in ensuring that postdocs feel that they are truly members of the University and appreciated for their wide-ranging contributions. It also has provided the option to follow leavers' careers and thus there are greater opportunities for ensuring that the University's skills training for postdocs, whilst in Cambridge, are fit-for-purpose. The benefits continue. The scheme enables former postdocs to be invited back to Cambridge to give talks and, as a new initiative, to provide mentorship (see below). This is an exciting development as many go on to develop dynamic and leading careers in academia, industry, government and 'not-for-profit' sectors.

Importantly, the mentoring programme will also enable us to develop even more strategies with Personal and Professional Development and the Careers Service so that an increasingly broad range of career opportunities are addressed. This highlights a particular strand of diversity within the postdoc community, given that around 70% of postdocs will be employed in non-academic jobs.

Entrepreneurial Postdocs of Cambridge

Entrepreneurial Postdocs of Cambridge (EPoC) was launched in April 2015 and there have been more than twelve events since then with a current mailing list of over 400 individuals. EPoC has evolved with support from the OPdA, Cambridge Enterprise, and Cambridge Judge Business School. It considers its core remit to:

- create awareness of entrepreneurial opportunities
- support members in their pursuit of entrepreneurial careers
- foster a multidisciplinary network of entrepreneurial postdocs with in the University.



EPoC also ran the first ever postdoc business competition in September 2015 (with financial support from Cambridge Enterprise) and more recently arranged yet another first for the postdoc community, an entrepreneurial event focused on social enterprise models. In today's knowledge-based economy, successful companies are increasingly looking to the world's leading academic research institutions for the next idea from the most dynamic minds.

Recent additional and complementary activities are a trial internship programme (see below) and, by EPoC itself, Cambridge Minds. The latter allows innovative companies to rapidly harvest ideas and solutions to solve the problems they face by engaging the University's postdocs on a consulting basis whose collective expertise spans the academic disciplines and whose depth of knowledge is unparalleled.

Researchers14

Researchers14 comprises thirteen Russell Group universities from the UK. The OPdA was instrumental in establishing this new network jointly with Imperial College in 2014. It represents 65% of the research staff postdoc community which totals 45,000 in the UK.

This vital group of researchers is the sole focus for Researchers14 who, by meeting three times a year, provide an overview of the people, culture and issues pertaining to early career researchers, and who share and develop good practices for their development.

Researchers14 is strategic in its activities, global in outlook and collaborative in its approach. Increasingly, the group is engaging actively with many of the major research funders (including Research Councils) who share similar values in striving to better support postdoc researchers.

Induction

Ninety different nationalities are represented within the Cambridge postdoc community and upon establishment of the OPdA, it quickly became apparent that making contact with new arrivals was an imperative if we were to ensure an inclusive and welcoming environment; especially one that created positive and timely assimilation into the University.

Getting Connected events, now nine annually, help the new incoming postdoc staff to become aware of the wide range of opportunities and services available within Cambridge. These events include short presentations plus opportunities to talk with typically twenty 'exhibitors' from across the University who offer relevant services to postdocs.

These events have been monitored and well-received by the University's Human Resources Division who now are looking to develop similar models for other staff groupings.

Communication

Communication is key to improving the support for postdocs and so, in addition to the OPdA website, links have been established with other groups in the University including the PdOC Society, Careers Service (3,000 postdocs have made contact with the service), Personal and Professional Development, the Human Resources Division, the Cambridge Judge Business School, Cambridge Enterprise, local networks and business partners.

Links with both Departments and Colleges encourage and facilitate postdocs becoming more involved in both. These approaches are invaluable to the OPdA in promoting its activities, allowing online enrolment for events and soliciting feedback, and for promoting many other activities from across the University.

The website also has information for those who have accepted a position in the University but have not yet arrived; information is provided to assist with their travel to and transition into the University and Cambridge with ease.



Departmental Postdoc Committees Network

The OPdA works with the Postdocs of Cambridge (PdOC) Society on diverse matters and work was undertaken on a particular project to establish a University-wide network of Departmental Postdoc Committees, initially in departments with higher numbers of postdocs. There now are around 30 Committees and we are promoting and encouraging the formation of new ones.

In clinical medicine and the two humanities-focused Schools, there generally are insufficient numbers of postdocs in the various departments and faculties, thus School-based Committees are more effective.



There are termly meetings of the Chairs so that good practice may be shared. These Committees provide a critical communication forum for ensuring that the OPdA continues to meet the needs of the whole postdoc community and embeds the importance of the ongoing assimilation of postdocs within the University.

Mentoring

A pilot scheme has been started recently and is based on an excellent project developed at Sheffield University (awareness of this resulted from the exchange of information amongst the Researchers14 group of universities – see above).

The OPdA scheme has already seen early success and the key outcome at this stage is that careers advice is the number one reason for applying for a mentor, especially as postdocs have only a 30% chance of securing tenured academic posts nationally.

With this ever increasing need for postdocs to look more broadly at career options and to reflect on their ambitions and personal skills in addition to their academic prowess, the OPdA aims to include alumni postdocs, now working across multiple sectors including academia, so that there is a varied and richer pool of experience from which to offer advice. The OPdA also will seek additional mentors outside academia more generally in order to provide postdocs with broader and differing perspectives.

Additionally, postdocs are increasingly becoming mentors to graduate students and the mentoring training is being expanded to provide postdocs with the necessary skills and training to become effective mentors.

College Affiliation

College affiliation is not a requirement for postdocs, unlike for undergraduates and graduates for whom it is mandatory. Many postdocs would welcome College affiliation and wish to contribute to College life, including by helping supervise undergraduates.

A significant review of postdoc engagement within the 31 Cambridge Colleges has been completed with recommendations to enhance College affiliation. These are being implemented and over 200 new College affiliations were created in the last three years with support from the Researchers' Development Executive.

For the next two years, the OPdA will continue to work with Colleges to share good practice and so broaden the wide range of initiatives across the Colleges.

Volunteers

OPdA initiated a very successful volunteer scheme whereby partners of postdocs may apply to engage on specific projects aligned to their skills and then offered training, references, job-hunting skills, advice, and the opportunity to build a network across Cambridge. Staff train the volunteers and support them fully and it is to their credit that the scheme is such a success. Of the 36 volunteers to date, 10 have gone into paid employment, nine are seeking employment, 10 were content to continue to volunteer (time-limited) and seven have only recently joined.



One of the key barriers to employment for this cohort often is language, mostly written, business-related English. We have been working with the Language Centre to develop a core programme run termly for our volunteers and we are currently seeking funding to further develop this successful pilot initiative to include three levels, beginner, intermediate and advanced training.

This volunteer scheme has already gained recognition more widely in the University and the OPdA is providing several administrative divisions with volunteers. It is an example whereby the OPdA first identifies a gap in University provision, takes initial action and then its pilot work is taken up and integrated into University good practice. The Human Resources Division has recently agreed to establish a Volunteers' Committee to enhance the Collegiate University's management, stewardship and recognition of its volunteers through advertising, monitoring, evaluations, development and exchange of best practice.

Looking Ahead: 2016 and Beyond In Progress

Internships

Several Research Councils have funded internships for graduate students that have worked well, and the OPdA is currently successfully piloting a scheme for internships and placements for postdocs funded by one of the Research Councils.

The next step will be to seek funding to extend the internship scheme to postdocs across all disciplines in the University. It is envisaged that this will be done in conjunction with Cambridge Judge Business School, the Careers Service, the Alumni Office (CUDAR), EPoC, UK Research Councils and similar funding bodies, and existing industry partners in the HEAPP project (see page 12).



European Community Collaboration (HEAPP)

The OPdA has applied, having enlisted eleven partners shown below, for this European Collaboration grant to build on its pioneering initiatives during the past three years. There are six industrial (enterprise) partners and five other HEIs.

Industry (enterprise) partners:

- AstraZeneca UK Limited
- BP International Ltd
- Schlumberger Cambridge Research Limited
- Shell Global Solutions International B.V.
- EF Education First Ltd
- Swarovski KG

University partners:

- The University of Cambridge
- Paris Sciences & Lettres (PSL) Research University
- University of Glasgow
- Universität Innsbruck

The envisaged structured career enhancement support for postdocs, which is the core of the programme, aims to stimulate and promote more extensive interactions between postdocs and industry and other sectors, in order to empower postdocs to develop more broadly and better exploit their knowledge and skills. This will enable them to contribute to different sectors beyond their familiar domain of academia. Hence this programme has been tailored to build upon the expertise of the OPdA, which, despite its short time in existence, is already recognised as a leader in Europe in providing a wide range of support to postdocs.

All the programme outcomes, building on the many initiatives already pioneered by the OPdA, will be made available to many additional EU stakeholders (HEIs and industries) and so benefit postdocs across the EU. Industries are keen to support this since they recognise that it will simultaneously assist them to innovate, grow and respond better to fast changing global markets.

Looking Ahead: 2016 and Beyond

Future Initiatives

Teaching Experience and Development

The aim is to develop, with the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Personal and Professional Development Division, models for providing structured opportunities for postdocs to develop a broader range of teaching experience. These models would include initial and ongoing professional development, with the potential for postdocs to gain formal teaching accreditation.

This also relates to the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework in Higher Education, which is likely to limit teaching contributions by postdocs unless there are clear 'training' programmes and quality assurance processes in place. Supporting postdocs in this way is consistent with the clear trend within universities globally to expect new teaching staff either to have a qualification in HE teaching or relevant experience.

Leadership Courses

Several leadership courses for postdocs are run across the University using internal and external providers, and offer an intensive and structured process for thinking about and building research leadership, but for limited numbers.

The OPdA wishes to develop a cost-effective cross-disciplinary mature programme focussing on skills and ways of thinking that transform nascent ideas into fully-fledged initiatives and ensure that postdocs realise their potential to be future leaders across a wide spectrum of fields and disciplines. The courses will be developed collaboratively, e.g. with the University's Personal and Professional Development Division, the Cambridge Judge Business School and Cambridge Enterprise. This is in line with the University's ambitions for more professional and wide-spread leadership awareness.

The aim also is to raise awareness of the skills needed by the next generation of Principal Investigators in universities; this is consistent with the thinking of major funders such as the UK Research Councils and the Wellcome Trust. This is a stepping-stone that plans for a significant generational change in attitudes toward leadership, and a commitment to support people within teams.

Destination Data

The UK HEI sector is successful in integrated student tracking models (DHLE), including destination data statistics. There now is an increasing focus on support for the ever-growing population of postdoctoral researchers (45,000 UK-wide) and early career fellows, and this is leading to significant changes in HR and researcher development initiatives, such as those undertaken by the OPdA.

Researchers14 (see above) has identified a significant gap in road-mapping and optimising the delivery of researcher development activities due to a lack of substantial destination data. As well as it being critical to ensuring postdocs have appropriate training opportunities while still working as postdocs, it does not allow continued contact with, and the involvement of (e.g. in internship programmes, see above), a large group of talented 'alumni', many of whom go on to become influential in their chosen employment sectors.

Hence Researchers14, together with the OPdA and Cambridge Careers Service, are considering various approaches to the improvement and regular collection and updating of destination data, and are discussing this with major research funders who also would appreciate and be able to more effectively utilise better data.

Fellowship Funded Postdocs

The University has many successful externally supported postdoc Fellowship schemes, the nature and terms of which can differ widely. For instance, some Fellows are not directly contracted by the University and so they may not receive support, both before their arrival as well as whilst in Cambridge, that could enrich and underpin more fully their time in Cambridge.

The OPdA, working in conjunction with the International Strategy Office, is working to improve awareness of the various Fellowship schemes and to provide information to ensure these incoming postdocs are properly integrated into the postdoc community. This will greatly enhance their enjoyment of being in Cambridge as well as contributing to a vibrant community.

Partner Institutions

Engagement with the University's partner institutes (e.g. MRC LMB, Sanger, EBI, Babraham) is dynamic and welcomed by the University itself, the partners and postdocs based at these sites.

The OPdA wishes to enhance how the University can support more fully the several hundred postdocs who carry out research collaboratively between the partners and the University. The OPdA is keen to ensure that these postdocs have access to many of the facilities, networking and interdisciplinary opportunities within the University, as well as the opportunities possible through the Postdoc Centres.

Partner institutes play a critical and key role in the University's research output and it is vital to ensure that these early career researchers are integrated fully, both for the institutes and University as well as for the individual postdocs themselves.

Governance

The OPdA is currently part of the Human Resources Division and this affiliation was instrumental in launching the early initiatives. The relationship has been very positive and it is hoped the close ties and progress of policy changes will continue as the OPdA moves to a more permanent, but separate, reporting structure within the UAS (University's Administrative Services).

It has been agreed in the last three months that this should be by the formation of a Postdoctoral Matters Committee, reporting to both Council and the General Board.

This also will facilitate another key aim for many of the issues addressed and new initiatives started by the OPdA, namely to see them adopted, run by and embedded in the University's established divisions in order to improve the support of staff generally.

postdocs

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Useful Links

OPdA website	opda.cam.ac.uk
Alumni benefits	opda.cam.ac.uk/beyondcambridge
EPoC	opda.cam.ac.uk/get-involved/epoc
CambridgeMinds	cambridgeminds.org
PdOC Society	pdoc.cam.ac.uk
Departmental Chairs Network	pdoc.cam.ac.uk/dpccn
Mentoring scheme	opda.cam.ac.uk/whileincambridge/mentoring
College affiliation	opda.cam.ac.uk/whileincambridge/collegeaffiliation
Volunteering	opda.cam.ac.uk/aboutus/the-team/volunteers-1/volunteers
Internships scheme	opda.cam.ac.uk/whileincambridge/epsrc-internship-pilot

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