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Career Development Toolkit for Researchers

Your interactive guide to help you
formulate an ongoing career strategy

Introduction

This toolkit is aimed at post-doctoral researchers who have gained one to two years experience in academic research. You may be at a point at which you are considering your overall career progress and development in academia or be contemplating a career change. This toolkit offers some general starting points for those wanting to reflect on their career to date and to begin to formulate an ongoing career strategy.



How to use the toolkit

Whatever stage you are at in your post-doctoral career it is advisable to work through section one to give yourself the opportunity to step back from the demands of daily work in order to analyse and consider fully your career to date. You may also wish to include in your reflections experiences that you have acquired in other areas of your life. The demands of busy jobs and personal lives give little time to consider and act on your personal and career development needs, and working through section one may offer some much needed time to analyse how you have gotten to where you are before considering the future. When you're constantly working on one research contract and trying to land the next one, it can be a powerful barrier to career development.

Sections two and three offer the chance to focus on academic career progress or career change. Some of you using this book may be clearly set on the academic career route and section two may therefore be your main focus, although it is strongly suggested that you read through section three so that you are aware of alternative career options and approaches to achieving them.

Section three is a **starting point** for those considering a career change or who are still not sure if the academic career pathway is for them. However, the emphasis here is that it's a starting point and does not provide an exhaustive approach to all the career options open to researchers. It aims to introduce a flexible approach by using the reflections and analysis undertaken in section one to generate avenues to explore as well as offering ways to develop these ideas further. Career transition is challenging for anyone, and the aim of section three is to help researchers to start the process and build momentum towards a possible career change.

The toolkit is divided into three main sections:

Section 1 – Stop and take stock

This section will offer the opportunity to review your career and experience and to reflect on your career decision making to this point. The information and analysis gathered in this section will then be used in sections two and three:

Includes:

- How did you get here?
- Taking stock
- Activities
 - Career decision making exercise
 - Reviewing your experience, contribution, skills and attributes

Section 2 – Assessing your academic career progress and planning for the future

This section will focus on the key areas of academic career development and offer prompts for your career analysis, with suggestions for future actions and tips on how to follow up on these.

Includes:

- Motivations
- Academic career progress checks
- Activity
 - Career progress check and development strategy

Section 3 – Considering alternative career options

In this part of the toolkit you will be encouraged to use the reflections on your experience undertaken in section one to investigate other career options.

Includes:

- Identifying career change clues
- Researching career options
- Activity
 - Diagram of career routes



1 Stop and take stock



How did you get here?

By reflecting on your career decision making up to now you may identify approaches that will be beneficial in managing the next stage of your career or be aware of some of the ways in which you could build up barriers to progress. The questions in exercise one are designed to prompt you to think about such things as the type of career decision-maker you have been up to now: for example, did you take an independent approach? did others influence you? and did you explore other career options? It can be tempting to adopt a cautious approach, or to let other people or external circumstances take control of your career development, but in today's challenging employment environments this may mean that you are not ready to take action when it is required.

Exercise: Career decision making

Why did you decide to do a PhD?

What career ideas or plans did you have at the start of your PhD?

At what point in your PhD did you decide to carry on in academic research and why?

Did anybody influence you to continue on to post-doctoral work? If so, who was influential, and was their influence positive or negative?

Did you explore other career options? If not, why not?

From your responses, what are your career decision-making strengths and weaknesses?

Taking stock

It is not always easy to find time to review and analyse the professional experience you have acquired. Often people only do so when faced with a career crisis, such as the end of a contract, or for a specific purpose, such as applying for a job or promotion. In these situations any review of your professional experience may be limited by the need to get a new job, or be focussed only on the specific job or promotion criteria. The next part of the toolkit offers some suggestions for undertaking a wide-ranging review to enable you to gather a comprehensive record of the experiences, attributes, skills and contributions you have made so far. This type of review can bring a number of areas to your attention that may be important when you are considering your next career moves. These include:

- Experience, attributes and skills gained that may not have come to the fore in a job application or work progress discussion
- Activities and responsibilities undertaken but not formally part of a job role
- Patterns and themes to a career journey so far that have been hidden by everyday work pressures
- Areas of strength, enjoyment, motivations and passions
- Experience, skills and attributes gained outside your immediate work environment

In a busy professional and personal life it can feel somewhat self-indulgent to take time out to review your career, but it is a necessary part of career management and has many uses. It can help to identify specific areas you need to focus on to make progress in your current employment, to assess future career opportunities within the same employment sector or to consider career changes. In addition, this type of review can also provide information for career progress discussions with your manager or mentor, as well as for job applications and interviews.



Activity: Reviewing your experience, contribution, skills and attributes

1. Job/contract review

Review and analyse each of your jobs/contracts within the following areas and write notes;

Job/contract

Key activities and achievements

Areas of progression and development

Additional experience gained not directly connected to your research

Overall career progress assessment

2. Overall Career Review

Analyse your career overall using the next set of questions:

If you have had more than one contract, which one has given you the most job satisfaction and why?

Which of your key activities have you enjoyed undertaking and why?

Which of your key achievements have given you the most satisfaction and why?

Who have you enjoyed working with and why?

Considering the times when you felt you made career progress, why was this? Were there specific aspects of that job, the people you worked with or the environment you worked in that contributed to your progress?

From your review of any additional experiences gained so far, which have you enjoyed the most and why?

Note down any aspects of these additional experiences that you would like to continue to use in the next stage of your career

Have you identified unconscious skills and work behaviours from your reflections, such as realising you are an effective negotiator, you enjoy training others or you have commercial expertise? If so, note them down here. Are there others you can add?

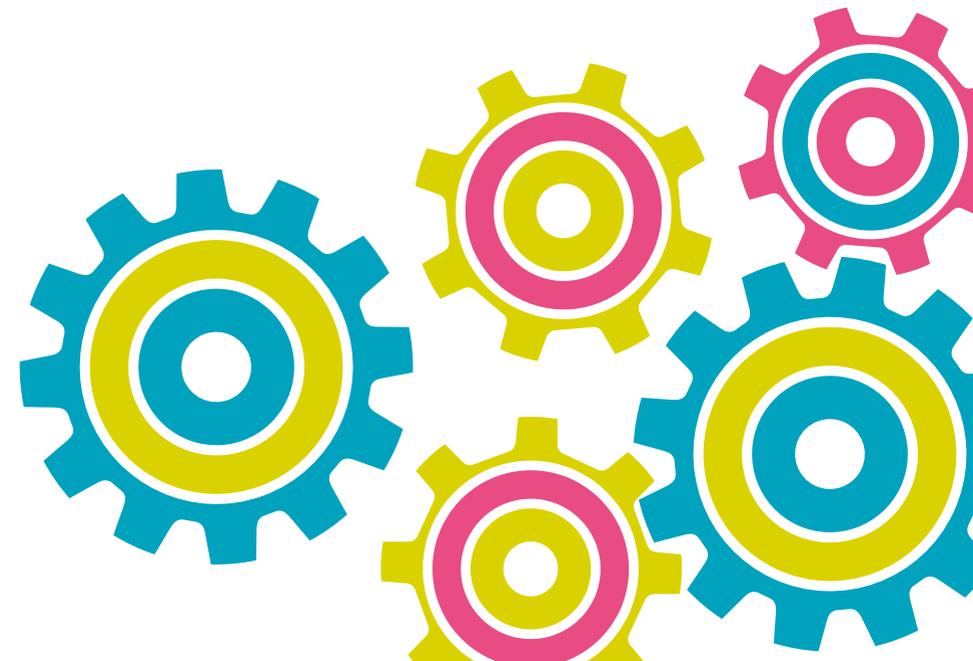
If your original decision to continue in academic research concerned motivations such as passion for research itself or for the specific research you were undertaking, is that original motivation still important to you?

What do you like about working in academic research?

What do you dislike about it?

To conclude this review of your career decision-making and your career up to now, it is important to recognise and value the full range of experience, skills, attributes and achievements you have acquired. Researchers can often judge themselves in terms of the success or otherwise of the research project they are currently working on. This may mean that they do not always appreciate other areas of progress and development, yet it may be some of these that will provide vital information for future career decisions and strategies.

It is also important to revisit your original motivations, as well as such things as the environment and culture you are working in. These things can change over time, especially when you transition from being a PhD student to working as a post-doctoral employee. It can be easy to push any concerns to the back of your mind, especially if facing them may mean that you need to consider seriously whether your academic career is on track or even if academia is still for you. Sections two and three of the toolkit are designed to help you to take on some of these challenges rather than simply hoping that everything will somehow be all right!



2 Assessing your academic career progress

As an early stage post-doctoral researcher, you face daunting challenges as you develop an academic career. The focus will be on developing your research independence whilst still delivering on your current research project as well as preparing for teaching and management responsibilities. Most researchers are also aware of the level of competition for academic positions and funding opportunities. The pressure is on from the beginning to keep your career moving forward, but this can mean missing out on considering some vital questions:



Motivations

Why do you want to be an academic?

Are you realistic about the transition from post-doc to academic and what it entails in terms of the role of an academic?

Are you staying because you do not know of any other career option, or because other people have persuaded you to stay or told you that "out there" is for those who can't make it as an academic?

Are you staying so you can prove to others that you can do it, even though you are not sure you want to stay?

These are realistic questions to ask yourself at the start of your career, and to continue to review as your career progresses. In some cases it is good to acknowledge that you need to think clearly about the aspects of continuing with an academic career that you will enjoy and others where you will need to prepare for different challenges. It can also be important to realise that you may be carrying on because others expect it of you and to then ask yourself if you need to give greater consideration to why you want to pursue this career route? Proving others wrong can be a powerful career motivation but is it enough to sustain a long term commitment to academia?

If your responses to the questions on motivations mean that you need to consider further if an academic career is for you, you could discuss this with a mentor or colleague. Questioning your original reasons for entering this career path may not mean that you should look at other career options immediately. Reviewing your motivations based on what you now know an academic career involves allows you to take a more strategic approach to managing your career development and assessing your career progress.

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Academic career progress checks

Broadly your progress checks should focus on:

- Development of research independence and output
- Preparation for teaching
- Management, administration and additional HE experience

Undertaking career progress checks is challenging and it is important that they are useful and prompt you to consider actions and strategies you can take to continue to develop your career. The next set of questions are designed as both a way of checking your career progress, but they also include suggestions of resources, information or actions which may enable you to set out a career strategy.



Activity: Career progress check and development strategy

Actions, Resources, Information

Progress Check and Strategy Notes

Overall Career Progress Check

Does your institution have descriptions of the work, skills and expectations for staff in research and academic roles? These might be published as a guide on the Human Resources department website or in a staff manual.

Use this type of information to find out what is required of researchers at the level(s) above your current post.

Assess your current experience levels against the requirements for the next level. You may want to refer back to section one and the reviews of your contracts so far.

From your review, which areas of your academic experience do you need to work on immediately?



| Actions, Resources, Information | Progress Check and Strategy Notes |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <p>Overall Career Progress Check</p> <p>What career actions do you need to focus on in the next year or as more medium-term actions?</p> | |
| <p>In some cases you will already have some experience of working at a higher level than your current grade. When has this happened, and in what areas have you done this?</p> <p>You can use this evidence to build your own confidence that you are ready to apply for a higher level post or to make a case for promotion.</p> | |
| <p>Use job descriptions for higher level posts to assess where you need to develop your experience in order to be ready to apply for similar posts.</p> | |
| <p>Research Plans and Strategy Development</p> <p>What are your main research interests?</p> <p>How likely are you to develop an independent research career around these interests?</p> | |

| Actions, Resources, Information | Progress Check and Strategy Notes |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <p>Research Plans and Strategy Development</p> <p>Do you need to re-position yourself in order to move towards an emerging area within your field?</p> <p>What are the research priorities and plans for your current school/department/faculty/institution?</p> <p>Are these published? (They might be in a University Plan or on the departmental website).</p> <p>How do your ideas and plans for the development of your research fit with these plans and priorities?</p> <p>If you are considering moving to another institution, look at their research plans and priorities as part of your preparation. Again, how do your plans complement their plans and priorities?</p> | |
| <p>Does your institution have funding opportunities aimed specifically at early career researchers that may enable you to add to your experience by managing your own project or developing specific skills?</p> <p>Are you eligible to apply?</p> <p>Do you need your manager's support and when are the deadlines for applications?</p> <p>What other funding opportunities and calls are there for you to target?</p> <p>Are there opportunities for you to collaborate with senior colleagues on grant applications and gain experience of grant writing?</p> | |

| Actions, Resources, Information | Progress Check and Strategy Notes |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <p>Involving others in your Career Development</p> <p>Does your institution have a mentor scheme for researchers?</p> <p>If not, can you identify and approach an academic colleague to become your mentor?</p> <hr/> <p>Plan and prepare for a career progress discussion with your Principal Investigator/research group leader. Initiate this discussion if you need to.</p> <p>Prepare by critically reviewing your academic career progress. Gather evidence of your achievements – don't expect your manager to know everything you have been involved in.</p> <p>Identify the areas you consider you need to develop further and be prepared to discuss these with your manager. Accept you may not get to do everything you want to – have some negotiation points.</p> <p>Is it worth volunteering to take on an extra activity because you may be able to gain some further experience?</p> <p>Be prepared that you could receive a challenging assessment of your chances of an academic career. Is it better to hear this sooner rather than later?</p> | |

| Actions, Resources, Information | Progress Check and Strategy Notes |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <p>Training and Development Actions</p> <p>Research the training and development opportunities that are available at your institution. Include them in your career strategy.</p> <p>For example, does your institution run a leadership programme for researchers? Do you need to apply and be supported by your manager to get a place on this type of course?</p> <p>Are there courses on preparing for a fellowship application?</p> <p>Are there teaching courses you could undertake, even if you are not teaching regularly?</p> | |

Although the suggestions and actions above do not form an exhaustive list, they do illustrate that researchers are expected to take responsibility for their own career development. The challenge can be to find the time to do this, and this is where you may need to decide where to focus your career development activities and take a strategic approach. You may not be able to do everything and so the temptation could be to do nothing: so from the responses above what do you need to focus on immediately:

My academic career priorities are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

3 Considering other career options

Some general comments on career transitions and change.

Most people will change career direction during the course of their working lives.

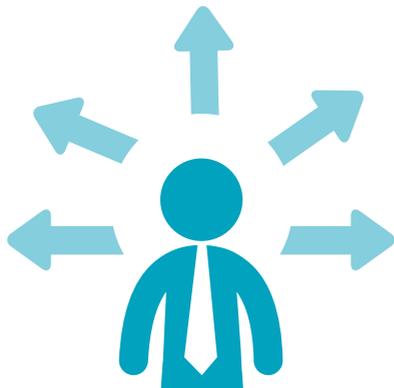
Career change is challenging, and can involve having to re-train or to prove yourself in a new career area before reaching the level of responsibility held previously.

Leaving academia can involve coming to terms with the end of something you have committed to for a considerable period of time. You may feel emotional or stressed. Seek out trusted friends or use impartial careers guidance to help you to work through these situations.

There are many practical and personal reasons why researchers change career. Your life and circumstances may have changed, and career change can involve compromise.

Career change can also mean taking risks. Researchers sometimes set out to find the perfect or "forever" career and in doing so can actually find that this is a barrier to change because it may be impossible to know everything before you make a decision.

Experience of working with researchers on career change demonstrates they can often focus on a job search or on specific career options information as a starting point, when it may be more important to take some time to consider themselves and their requirements for a new career. With this in mind, the next set of questions are designed to help you to step back from a job search and instead consider more widely what you may need from a change of career.



Identifying career change clues



From the review of your career in section one, which work activities, skills and behaviours have you most enjoyed using?

Which of them would you like to continue to use in a new career area?

Consider the responses you made to questions about additional experience you have from outside your immediate research tasks and from your reflections on unconscious skills and behaviours.

Which are areas of work or tasks you have enjoyed or are good at?

Could any of these provide a route into a new career area?

An example would be identifying that you enjoy science outreach or communication, then using this to investigate possible career opportunities that would use these skills.

Are there activities, skills and behaviours you enjoy using but would need to gain further experience of or formal credentials in before you could use them in a new career?

How important is it to you to remain working in an employment area related to your academic background?

Do you have experience, skills or talents from outside work that could lead to a potential career change?

What type of working culture and environment do you thrive in?

What practical and personal constraints may affect your career change considerations?

Eg., availability for part time vs full time work only due to parenting, geographical location or commute length etc. Are these constraints non-negotiable or is there room to reconsider them in certain circumstances? What would these circumstances be?

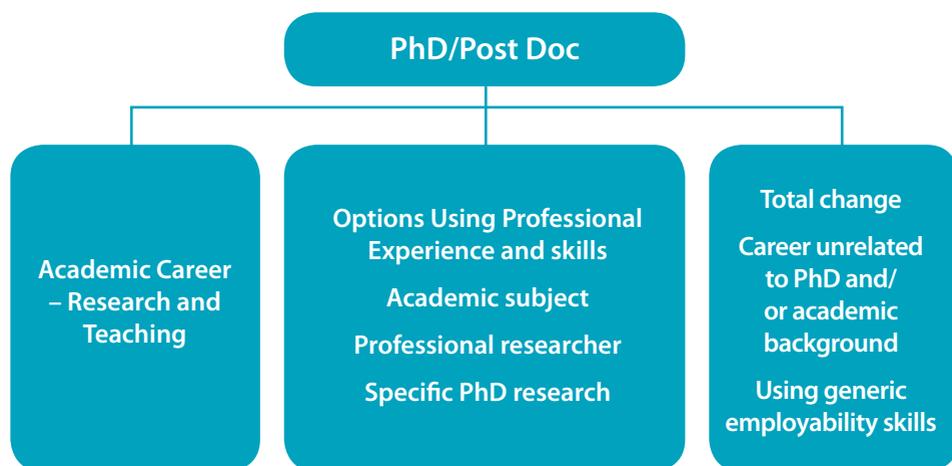
These questions are a starting point, and you may need to expand and continue this type of reflection and review before focussing on a specific career path. Other actions you could take are to work through the exercises in [jobs.ac.uk Career Change Toolkit](#), seek advice from a careers professional or discuss your situation with a mentor or someone in your work or personal network.



Researching career options

Now that you have started to consider what you want from a career move you will need to research possible career areas to find out more about them but again I would suggest there are some stages to go through before you begin applying for jobs.

- 1 From your responses in the earlier part of this section of the toolkit about your needs and using the diagram below which sets out the broad career options for researchers, where are you in your thinking at the moment?



- 2 From this broad view of your career options, you will need to begin to focus on some specific options and ideas. To move towards this you could complete the Career Planner on www.prospects.ac.uk/myprospects_planner_login.htm to generate some possible career areas for further investigation. Using the job profiles information at www.prospects.ac.uk/types_of_jobs.htm will provide further detail about the career areas you might be considering.

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- 3 Another way of investigating career options is to use job adverts and information. However, this should be done before you want to apply for jobs. Try to remove any specific requirements you would have concerning salary, location and even job title, and collect any advert or piece of job information that interests you for any reason at all. Do this for a few weeks and then analyse the information you have collected for any common themes. For example are particular job titles a recurring theme, or are a specific set of skills attracting your attention?

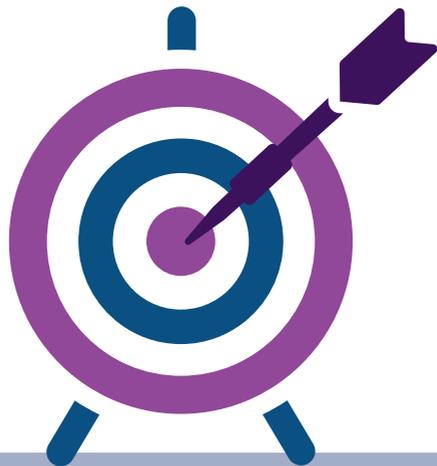
- 4 Use information on the career pathways taken by researchers: The "What do researchers do?" series of publications at www.vitae.ac.uk includes profiles of researchers in a number of different career areas as well as those who have gone on to start their own businesses.

- 5 Don't forget your own networks and contacts: perhaps you have friends or former colleagues who have moved into a new career and they may be able to offer realistic and current information on their area of employment.



Summary

Whether you are reviewing your academic career progress or considering a change, you will need to step back and take some time to consider your current situation before moving forward. Making career progress or a career change is about taking incremental steps and building momentum rather than trying to make a great leap forward. Identify the first small step you can take now, whether that is to read some career profiles or to review your progress over the last year. Then ACT on what you discover, set the next goal and keep working towards it. Talk to friends, family, a mentor or a careers adviser, and use these discussions to keep focussed on your career target.



About the author

Clare Jones is a Senior Careers Adviser at Nottingham University with specific responsibility for Early Career Researchers. Clare has been working with research staff and students since 2005 offering individual careers guidance, advice and information and delivering career management training courses across the university. Clare would describe her own career as being a “classic skills portfolio career” and she is strongly committed to enabling researchers to recognise and value all their skills and experiences.



Recommended reading

[A Practical Guide to Planning an Academic or Research Career](#)

[Research Publications Planner](#)

[How to Write a Cover Letter for Research Jobs](#)

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