Agenda

- Our studies among postdocs in the Netherlands
  - Includes 9 universities (out of 14)

RQ: How do postdocs experience their academic career and what are their prospects for the future?
Postdoc dilemma: to leave or not to leave academia? – Join our live chat Friday 21 June 2013 from 12pm to discuss making an informed choice on the future of your research career

Postdocs in the Media

Published online 2 March 2011 | Nature 471, 7 (2011). Column

Give postdocs a career, not empty promises

Lift off: How to launch your career after a postdoc

12 March 2014
Definition

‘Postdoctoral researchers (postdocs) are newly qualified researchers with a PhD, working autonomously in research at universities or related institutions but without a tenured contract’ (Stanford et al., 2009, p.3)

Ambivalence 1: The Value of postdocs and their relationship with the organisation

- Highly educated, specialized, and productive professionals (O’Grady & Beam 2011), contribute to economic and social growth in countries (Häyrinen- Alestalo & Peltola 2006)

- Responsible for a disproportionate share of discoveries and innovations (Davis 2009). 40% of 1st authorships in Science (O’Grady & Beam 2011)

- Pilling up postdocs positions -> Multiple relocations (McAlpine 2012), weakens perspectives

- Postdocs are also the source of future productivity (Mitchell et al.2013).

- They also have the potential to become key players, bridging knowledge between national and international scientific and scholarly networks (Horta 2009)
Ambivalence 2: Postdoc within the Academic Career Trajectory (boundaryless vs one-dimensionality)

• A postdoc position is no longer a short-term entrance trajectory into the academia but more likely a longer-lasting experience (e.g. Fitzenberger & Schulze 2013; Stanford et al., 2009)

• A postdoc trajectory can be considered a preliminary requirement for obtaining a permanent position

• Longer duration of insecure career prospects (Van Engen, Bleijenbergh, & Vinkenburg, 2010)

What do we know so far?

– No separate staff category in the national classification system of functions within universities
– Career perspectives insecure: 20% tenured positions (Goede, Belder, & De Jonge, 2013)
– Immature career and talent policies for postdocs at university level (HRM) (Thunnissen & Fruytier 2014)
– The career development of postdocs seems to occur rather coincidentally, as a sort of black box and without the influence of any systematic career planning (Van Arensbergen, 2014)
– Length of their postdoc employment negatively affects their career satisfaction and prospects. Weakly linked to organisation, expect nor receive much support (Teelken & Van der Weijden, 2018).
Our studies among Postdocs in the Netherlands [2018-2019]

- Web surveys: postdocs at 9 Dutch universities (out of 14)
  Variables: e.g. postdoc trajectory; preliminary career features; career ambition/perspectives; career preparations; satisfaction; mental health

RQ: How do postdocs experience their academic career and what are their prospects for the future?

Mixed method; Multi Actor study

Summary Results Web Surveys

- 34 years; 48% female, 51% male, 1% gender neutral
- 49 % Dutch nationality; 32% children (55% of females)
- work 31 months as postdoc (33/30)
- Disciplines: Natural Sciences, (27%), Social Sciences (21%), Medical and Health Sciences (21%), Engineering and Technology (17%), Humanities (9%) and Agricultural Sciences (5%).
Websurvey results

• The relatively weak career prospects in academia negatively impacts the struggle to find a work–life balance
• Feel publication and grant pressure -> stress
• Limited attendance of training modules or courses (28% none at all) to develop their personal and transferable skills (formalised)
• Some feel resistance to talk with supervisor about non-academic career possibilities
• Satisfied with daily working environment [colleagues, immediate supervisor]
• Would like to be treated by university as ‘serious group’ of employees
• Not satisfied with career support or career prospects offered by university

Future: Stable job in Academia?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the chance/possibility that you will acquire a stable job in academia in the near future?</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very small</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither small nor large</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very large</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Mental Health**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How have you been feeling the last few weeks?</th>
<th>N (worse than usual)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Been able to concentrate?</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost much sleep over worry?</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt constantly under strain?</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt you couldn’t overcome difficulties?</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been able to enjoy your day-to-day activities?</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been feeling unhappy and depressed?</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been loosing confidence in yourself?</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been feeling reasonably happy?</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Open questions:**

- Particularly stressful = the combination 1) the insecurity of their prospects, 2) the high workload, 3) the number and complexity of their tasks and 4) their work-life balance:

- ‘But the combination of having a short-term contract, yet facing very high expectations from my employer, in a period in my life when I’d rather be building something stable, is difficult and demanding… All of that without any guarantee for stability’. (social sciences, male, Dutch, midterm).

- ‘The pressure to combine all these things with the need of getting your own funding, teaching load within normal working days (to keep time for the family) without a great prospect of getting a permanent position is sometimes difficult’. (natural sciences, female, Dutch, long-term).
However:

• ‘Well, I love what I do. Academic research is awesome. I enjoy it a lot. Which is probably why I accept my current situation, with high performance pressure, working lots of hours, not having much leisure time, not being in awesome health, being in an insecure and stressful working situation (will I have a job in academia this fall?!). (social sciences, female, Dutch, long term).

Considerations

• **Universities** should regard postdoctoral researchers much more seriously within their current labour organisation:
  – Involving the postdocs themselves, but also top and middle management

• The attitudes of postdocs and their supervisors toward their professional and career development require change (broader perspectives, avoid inside/outside academia stereotype)

• Postdocs are active in their ‘Job Crafting’, this should be encouraged (informal activities)
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