Session 1: Current situation and challenges

Early career researchers’ perspective on the precariousness of postdocs working conditions

Working precariously as a postdoc: “Big issues” and “daily hassles”

OECD Global Science Forum
International Workshop on “Reducing the precarity of researchers’ careers”
Paris, October 7, 2019

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www.eurodoc.net

Eurodoc, The European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers

- Created in 2002 and based in Brussels
- Volunteer, non-profit organisation
- Members: 28 national associations from 26 countries that represent ECRs
- Is funded by member fees and supported by volunteers
- Aim: To develop & inform policy & organize events

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Junior Researcher

Junior Researcher is a term coined by Eurodoc to refer to people who have been awarded a doctoral degree and are engaged in a temporary and defined period of advanced, not yet fully independent research, either in academia, in the public or in the private sector.

Postdoc: researchers in their 1st years after their doctoral degree (...) most often used to refer to researchers on a fixed term contract (...) tends to be used at universities

Defining Junior Researchers and the Challenges they Face
(Eurodoc, October 2017)

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Background

- Increase in the supply of doctorate degree holders has not been accompanied by demand (in/outside academia)
- Growth in the number of precarious, fixed-term positions offered to those wishing to pursue an academic career
- These positions become a bottleneck trapping postdoctoral researchers in an endless loop of precariousness with serious ramifications for their lives
Postdoc paradox

“Big issues”

“Daily hassles”

Sources

• Reports from Eurodoc member organizations

• Eurodoc Postdoc survey

www.eurodoc.net
Eurodoc Postdoc Survey

- N = 1760 JRs (73.64%)
- Total N = 2390
- Oct 2018 - Feb 2019

> 30 countries in Europe
(502 = IT; > 100 = DK, FR, ES, SE, CH, UK)

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* Gender

0 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000
Male Female Other/not disclosed

* Age

26-30 years 31-35 years 36-40 years 41-45 years > 46 years
416 893 354 80 16

* Field of Research

Biology and Biotechnology Medical and Health Sciences Physical Sciences Social Sciences Humanities

716 532 260 51 121

* Year of PhD completion

125 704 898

* Relationship status

Single Married or cohabiting In a relationship Other/prefer not to answer

470 1004 245 45

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Postdoc paradox

“Big issues”

- Fixed, short-term contracts → “chain contracting”
  - 1-4, 6-8 month contracts; 1-3 years
  - Sequencing of contracts w/ different lengths → legal limits
  - 0.8 FTE → expectation of 1-1.2 FTE

- Stipends
  - Low salaries
  - Big savings to employers (indirect employee costs) → 2 stipends = 1 employment contract

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- Risk of poverty → salaries don’t cover cost of living; pensions
- Implications for family formation and access to housing (e.g., mortgages)
- People working with a series of temporary contracts for many years (e.g., ≥10 years)
• Own funding/fellowship = 250 
  (14.2%)
• Project-based funding = 1011 
  (57.4%)
• Institution core funding = 580 
  (33%)
• Other = 87 (4.9%)

1587 (90.2%) w/ full-time contracts
• W/ exclusivity = 965 (54.8%)
• Without exclusivity = 622 
  (35.3%)

• Lack or inadequate access to social benefits
  ✓ Sick leave
  ✓ Annual leave
  ✓ Parental leave → non-existent or of short duration; no 
    extension of contract; new mothers/mothers-to-be drop out of 
    academia
  ✓ Unemployment benefits → no income during waiting periods
  ✓ Pension contributions → not guaranteed; mobility (RESAVER)
  ✓ Healthcare/health insurances → national healthcare only; 
    usually lower insurance premiums w/ incomplete coverage 
    paid by the postdoc
• Often
  ✓ **No career structure** (research careers) → fragmentation; no clear path/progress
  ✓ Universities/ researchers as “special cases” (e.g., length of contracts; number of time contracts can be renewed)
  ✓ **Decrease** in publicly funded positions or **increase** in the offer of temporary positions; non-regular calls
  ✓ No access to collective bargaining at national level
  ↓
  • **Cuts/imbalances** in positions on offer
  • Employers/universities perceive **no advantages in hiring postdocs** (1 postdoc = 2 DCs)

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**Provisions included in contract/fellowship**

- Weekly work hours
  - > 40h = 967 (54.9%)
  - 30-40h = 544 (30.9%)

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**Perceived difficulty in achieving career goal(s)**

- 1 or 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

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**Main barriers to career development** (answers 3-5)

- Lack of employment opportunities
- Structure of research careers
- Absence of research careers
- Lack of career dev. Support

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*The European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers*
• “Chain postdocs” / contracting → no long-term planning
  ✓ High turnover with waiting periods → no formal career breaks
    (working with no contract or source of income)
  ✓ Permanent doubt/fear about next pay check/contract
  ✓ High pressure to comply/conform → high competition among peers/colleagues; little to no autonomy from supervisor/PI
  ✓ Need to continuously apply to positions → continuous, time-consuming cycle that hinders performance of other tasks (e.g., publishing)
  ✓ Foreigners → lower contributions to national pensions fund;
    w/ stipend, no access to residency; lack of transparency about actual contract/employment conditions

• Work-life balance and wellbeing

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Impact of career on wellbeing

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Free/working time are in balance

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Work/life balance satisfaction

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Factors affecting private life

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Postdoc paradox

“Daily hassles”

- Often, no representation in decision-making bodies of the universities → numbers tend to be close to equal to permanent staff

- Short-term contracts / stipends → common situations:
  - Bench fees / tuition (e.g., programs offering a non-degree diploma of postdoctoral research) → pressure to teach for free

  - Problems in accessing facilities (e.g., work space/office and/or computer; printing; libraries)

  - Exclusion from staff information and communication (e.g. mailing lists) in addition to problems in accessing university email-account/institutional address

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- **Short-term contracts / stipends → common situations (cont.):**

  - Little to no integration in departments/department life (e.g., institutional/public collaborations or networks; teaching; access to training/personal development activities)

  - Don’t always have access to funding from institution for research-related activities (e.g., travel costs, proof-reading, publication fees)

- **Universities are not prepared for non-nationals/non-speakers of national language(s)**

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Recognition

- **Supervision** → not always recognized, although often are expected to contribute/do it for (instead of) supervisors

- **Applying for funding**
  - Not always recognized → cannot apply as PI/Co-PIs
  - Non-transparent institutional practices (e.g., regarding decisions about who may/may not apply; selection criteria/control over access to the certain calls/funding)

- **No transparency in recruitment procedures** → public dissemination of open positions is often a formality

Are you allowed to apply for funding as PI/Co-PI?

- Yes: 802
- No: 514
- I don't know/prefer not to answer: 466

Are you authorized to supervise students?

- I prefer not to answer/no answer: 15
- I don't know: 195
- I am not allowed to do any type of supervision: 111
- I supervise or co-supervise, but my supervision is not formally acknowledged: 488
- I am only allowed to co-supervise, and my co-supervision is formally acknowledged: 411
- I am allowed to supervise and co-supervise, and my supervision is formally acknowledged: 457

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Mobility (institutional, contractual) → worsens precariousness:
- Weight of informal networks/supervisors/department heads in access to opportunities (e.g., employment; permission to apply for funding)
- Does not favor long-term guidance/mentoring from supervisors/senior scholars

Mismatch between qualifications and tasks

Structural power imbalances
- Senior scholars/permanent staff define the rules
- Postdocs not always considered as relevant or of much worth by permanent staff (academic/non academic)
Charter & Code / HRS4R

- Framework for regulating the system
- Can make a change to the recruitment and working conditions of (postdoctoral) researchers

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Long-term problem → how to ensure awareness and enforcement of the C&C principles?

Positive discrimination in access to funding

MCAA/Eurodoc joint statement

MCAA/Eurodoc joint Declaration (2019)
Early career researchers’ perspective on the precariousness of postdocs working conditions

Thank you!

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