Planning an academic career

If you are finishing your PhD or in the early years of postdoctoral work, this guide will help you to identify whether a long term academic career is for you, and to get started early on the things that will make this possible.

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1. Develop a research strategy

If you want to pursue an academic career, you will ultimately be aiming to work on your own research questions. If you’re on a postdoctoral contract, you’re probably currently working on someone else’s project and largely on their ideas. Or, depending on your discipline, you might already be starting to generate your own research questions or you might even be working on your own second project with an early career fellowship. Once you’re a Principal Investigator (PI), group leader or lecturer, you’ll be in charge of generating your own research questions and projects, possibly for your own team of PhDs and postdocs. You’ll need to find your space within the academic community.

Think ahead to this time – what do you want to be working on? What questions and problems interest you? Do you want to change direction or combine different approaches/topic areas? If so, think about what expertise you will need to develop, and look for projects and postdoc positions that will help you to achieve this. Your postdoc is a period of time when you can consolidate your identity as a researcher, projecting forward to this long-term view.

During your academic career, you’ll be expected to generate income from research grants to fund your work, especially if you work in a field that requires expensive experiments and equipment, and teams of researchers to carry it out. So as you plan your research, ask yourself: Is this area of research likely to attract funding? Will it interest other people? Will it lead to publishable results? You’ll need to compete with other academics in your field. Who else is working on this topic? What is unique, what is better, about your approach? What would happen if nobody undertook your research? Learning to say ‘why’ persuasively takes practice, so start now. Challenge yourself to talk to lots of different people about your work and convince them it’s worthwhile – it’s all too easy to get positive feedback from people in your field, who are already invested in similar topics.

Finally, you need to consider the practicalities and build these into your plans from the start: Where in the world will you work? Do you need to be in a particular location? If so, can you do the kind of research you
want to do there? Find out the academic career structure in the country you’re interested in and what you will need to do in order to get there.

**Don’t go it alone: mentors**
Mentoring describes a relationship between two individuals where one (the mentor) offers informal advice and guidance to another (the mentee). Many researchers find it useful to have one or more academic mentors to help guide them in developing research ideas and navigating the academic career path.

Mentors don’t have to be formally assigned, although some departments may offer you the opportunity to take part in an organised mentoring scheme. The key to success in a mentoring relationship is to find someone with whom you are comfortable and can talk openly about your plans and concerns. This might happen naturally with people you meet as you progress in your academic career, and you may even find yourself being ‘mentored’ without realising it. However, you can also approach individuals and ask them to be your mentor, if you want to make things more official.

A mentor from within your field can be useful in giving critical feedback about your research plans, while someone from outside your field might be able to give more objective advice about developing your career. The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs runs a University-wide mentoring scheme, and it provides training and guidance for both mentees and mentors. [www.opda.cam.ac.uk](http://www.opda.cam.ac.uk)
2. Become an independent researcher

As you progress through your research career, you should be gradually moving from delivering someone else’s project, towards initiating and delivering your own projects. When applying for funding (see p6) or tenured positions, one of the aspects you will be judged on is how independent your work has been. How early you start to work independently depends to some extent on your discipline - researchers in the arts and humanities are likely to be independent much sooner than scientists or some social scientists.

If you have a PI it is a good idea to talk regularly and openly with them about your plans, in order to balance your need to become independent with your PI’s need for you to deliver on his/her own research projects. In many science disciplines the first author on a paper is the person responsible for carrying out the research, and in the early stages of your research career you will be expected to build a publication list of first author papers. As you progress to more senior positions you will start to be the last named author on the publications, indicating that you were the PI for the project. However, you should learn the authorship practices in your discipline, which may differ from this convention, and how your publication list will be viewed by selection panels.

Here are some ideas for how you can begin to develop your own independent research profile:

- Are there projects that particularly interest you, which you would like to pursue further, or take in a slightly different direction to your PI’s interests? Discuss with your PI how you could take this forward.
- Initiate collaborations of your own with contacts you make through conferences and other networking opportunities.
- Supervise a summer student, undergraduate project, or informally co-supervise a PhD student. Devise their project and help them towards their goals.
- Look for funding to support your own project(s). This might be a small amount to fund a side-venture, right up to a 3-5 year fellowship to work completely independently.
3. Get your own funding

When you come to apply for lectureship positions, one of the criteria on which you will be judged is your ability to bring in grant money and you should assume that your interview will include questions about your plans for securing research funding. If you have already secured some of your own funding, this provides convincing evidence that you have the skills to do this again in the future. It’s also crucial in giving you the chance to do some research based on your own ideas.

Start small – look for opportunities to win small amounts to fund travel or side projects. Offer to help write parts of research grants within your research group, to familiarise yourself with the process.

Think about how you will progress – investigate fellowship opportunities, which usually pay your salary, and may also offer money for research costs. More senior fellowships offer you the opportunity to have a student or postdoc working with you – effectively allowing you to start your own group.

Start early – applying for funding is a time-consuming process, and it may take a few attempts before you are successful. It can take up to a year between applying for funding and receiving the money, and some schemes only advertise once a year, so make sure you know well in advance the deadlines for the main schemes that interest you.

Where to look for funding
The University subscribes to www.researchprofessional.com, which is a comprehensive database of funding opportunities: sign up to receive alerts on funding opportunities for your career stage and discipline.

In AHSS, the best source of advice for Cambridge researchers is the AHSS Research website run by the two AHSS schools. It includes advice for early career researchers, detailing schemes for which you are eligible and annual deadlines that you need to know about. www.ahssresearch.group.cam.ac.uk

It’s also a good idea to ask for advice from your PI and colleagues in your department(s) about funding opportunities, and to take note of who funded the research in publications in your field.
You can find further advice about applying for funding at: www.careers.cam.ac.uk/pdocsci/Academic/Funding/

If you are looking for sample fellowship and grant applications, your first port of call will be your faculty or department’s research grant administrator. You can also search for people who hold the grant/fellowship you are applying for, and ask if they have any tips on applying, and if they would be willing to let you read their application.
4. Become known in your academic community

As you progress through your PhD and postdoc, you should aim to extend your academic network, and raise your profile within the community. Job adverts for permanent academic jobs often ask for individuals with an ‘international reputation’, and ideally you want your name to be known already among members of a selection panel when you apply for these roles.

Some ways in which you can start to build your profile within your own academic community are:

- Attend conferences – and make sure you talk to people there! Look for contacts for potential collaboration or future postdoc positions.
- Become more involved in conferences over time, and as you become more established, look for higher-profile opportunities – submit an abstract for a short talk rather than a poster. Eventually, you should be aiming to be an invited speaker and possibly to chair sessions – these opportunities often come at a later stage of your postdoc career or as you start to become established through a fellowship.
- Get involved in peer review. Ask your PI if you can review some of the papers which he/she receives. Contact editors of journals whose research you have the expertise to review.
- Organise/chair a seminar series in your group or department – this will give you an opportunity to make personal contact with external speakers from your field, and if you are the organiser you will probably have the opportunity to host them on the day.

What does good networking look like?
Very few people enjoy showing off to acquaintances they’ve just met or schmoozing with the star academic in the room, and here’s the good news: that’s not what appropriate networking is. Ditch the elevator pitch in which you ‘sell’ yourself in an over-rehearsed burst of personal promotion. Really good networking entails listening more than talking, because the value of networking lies in knowing who else is out there and what they’re working on, just as much as it does in becoming known yourself.
Your goal is to find out what colleagues are working on, what their concerns are, what projects they have in the pipeline – and then to see if you can find ways to show that you share their interests and/or could help them be successful.

Right from day one, aim to be generous in the way you network. Practise asking open-ended questions that give your interlocutor room to talk. You might even aspire to be the ‘link’ person introducing two researchers who go on to collaborate – because research shows that, if you do, they will remember you positively.

**Academic service**
The academic community relies on people undertaking various tasks unrelated to advancing their own research, in order to keep the research community running. For example, academics need to review journal papers and grants, etc.

There will be opportunities for you to take on some of these tasks while you are a postdoc, and they can be valuable in bringing you into contact with a broad range of academics, and potentially raising your profile. However, these tasks can also be very time-consuming at the expense of your research, and while they provide useful evidence of your contribution to the community, selection panels will not give this much weighting. You should be careful to balance involvement in these with your research.

Some tasks with which you could get involved include:
- Committee work – e.g. a department postdoc committee
- Peer review for journals
- Public engagement or widening participation
- Pastoral work – e.g. mentoring students, welfare schemes

**Referees – cultivate early and choose wisely**
Selection panels for permanent academic jobs pay a lot of attention to the references that come with your application, so it’s important that they serve you well.

You will need to choose your referees wisely. It can look very impressive to have a big name in your field listed as a referee, but this will only be useful if they can give a convincing account of your work.
You will usually have to offer two or three referees, giving you the opportunity to select individuals who can talk about different aspects of your work – e.g. international collaborators with whom you have interacted independently, or industrial contacts. It’s a good idea to cultivate your referees early, and always let them know if you are going to list them on an application.

Selection panels may be suspicious if your current supervisor is not listed as a referee, so if you don’t get on with them to the extent that you feel you can’t use them as a referee, it can be awkward. It’s a good idea to try to resolve any conflicts before you need to apply for jobs, so that you can rely on a reference from your boss. But if you are still concerned that he or she will not represent you fairly, it may be better not to list them. If you don’t, be prepared to justify this decision at interview.

Manage your time
If there’s one thing that academics are inclined to do, it’s complain about time – or, more accurately, a lack of time. They have a point. There are many emails, ever more contact hours with students, a lot of committee meetings, much admin, so many competing pressures – all of which can leave insufficient time for research or a healthy work-life balance. It’s sobering, quite frankly, to think about what you will actually have to achieve in an average working week.

Planning an academic career, therefore, also means developing robust strategies for managing your time effectively – identifying and prioritising your high-return activities, doing your fair share of the low-return activities, and sustaining your wellbeing along the way. Start now.

If your work is interdisciplinary
In the last few years, millions of words have been written about interdisciplinarity, and many of them feel more than a little overblown. After all, when was the last time you encountered a piece of research that wasn’t in some sense drawing on more than one discipline?
But there’s no denying that research which spans multiple fields and speaks to multiple audiences is what many of the sponsors say they want to fund.

If you are envisaging an ‘interdisciplinary’ career or considering a discipline shift after your current research, then there are some important things to consider. To be a strong candidate, you will probably need:

- To publish in journals and with presses that are ranked highly in each of the disciplines your work covers.
- To speak at conferences across the relevant disciplines.
- To build your networks throughout your disciplines, so that you know what’s going on.
- To figure out where your research fits with typical undergrad and postgrad degree programmes, because your path to a permanent career will require you to teach.
5. Get teaching experience

Why is it important to teach?
The majority of long-term academic jobs are lectureships, where teaching is an integral part of the job. Many researchers opt to do some teaching because they want to get experience and enjoy the interaction with students. But teaching can also be a very time-consuming task and can distract from research, so getting the balance right is important.

When you apply for a lectureship in the UK, you can expect your teaching ability to be assessed. However, how this is done, and the extent to which it plays a part in your selection, can vary widely between institutions. Historically, very research-intensive institutions gave teaching experience a lower priority than research productivity when selecting candidates, but the introduction of the UK Government’s Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 is changing this. The TEF stresses the importance of student evaluations and employability outcomes, and puts pressure on institutions to put more weight on teaching ability when they recruit and promote academics.

Teaching-intensive institutions regularly cite that higher education teaching qualifications are desirable in lectureship candidates, and it remains to be seen whether research-intensive institutions will follow suit. What is clear is that if you want to be a lecturer in the UK, preparedness to teach is going to be key – in the sense of being both willing and competent, demonstrated by some relevant experience. Check lectureship job descriptions on www.jobs.ac.uk regularly to make sure that your experience matches what is being asked for.

If you’re applying outside the UK, find out about conventions in the country you are targeting. In the US, for example, you are likely to need to demonstrate more substantial evidence of teaching.

There is an assumption that teaching experience must be gained in a formal setting, such as lecturing a course, which is not always easily accessible. There’s no need to assume this – in fact, researchers often
have more relevant experience than they realise. A 2014 survey of 170 UK academics showed that selection panels for academic jobs did expect candidates to demonstrate some evidence of teaching, but that this would most likely come from small-group teaching or informal research supervision.

That said, it is a good idea to try and develop a variety of teaching experience – one type of teaching, or amassing many hours always supervising the same course, doesn’t represent added value for you. Outside of Oxbridge, supervisions may not be seen as equivalent experience to lecturing or tutorials. Look for opportunities to give guest lectures or seminars, either in your own department, or at other universities.

Teaching experience is useful, but not if it comes at the expense of your research output. If you find that your teaching responsibilities are taking too much of your research time, you may need to review this balance.

**How to demonstrate teaching effectiveness**

When applying for lectureships or teaching-focused positions, it’s not enough just to show that you have taught. What panels will want to know is whether you are a successful teacher.

Student evaluations are becoming increasingly important, and the TEF is likely to push this further. There are numerous objections that could be raised about this trend toward metrics, particularly the research showing that students consistently review women academics less favourably than men, but the present reality of the job market is that student evaluation data are taken seriously at many institutions. Give potential employers the benefit of the doubt: it is only right that they should be trying assess whether you would be an effective teacher for their students.

So, how can you show effectiveness in your teaching?

- Depending on your department and/or current status, you might not automatically get feedback on your teaching performance. If not, consider implementing your own evaluation survey.
• You need to gather quantitative as well as qualitative feedback, because in job applications you can’t just cherry-pick a couple of lovely quotes from your most positive students – everyone will know that you have only selected the best ones!
• Sign-up numbers for optional courses and final exam results can, in the right circumstances, be used as quantitative evidence of success.

Remember that, at the end of the day, teaching is about making choices with positive intent. Be ready to articulate, with evidence, why you do what you do – why do you use X method, teach Y skills, use Z means of assessment? Take the time to find out what others do, and why they think that it’s effective. Read up on innovative teaching in your field. Experiment with different approaches. And always aim to capture evidence that you have been successful.

**How to get teaching experience**
If you would like to get involved in teaching or supervising students, the best place to start is by asking your PI or an academic mentor. You could also find out which members of staff lecture the undergraduate courses which interest you, and approach them to offer your services. Some PIs and PhD students in your department will be able to tell you about getting teaching experience within the Cambridge Colleges’ supervisions of undergraduates. For more ideas on gaining different types of teaching experience, see [www.careers.cam.ac.uk/pdocsci/Academic/Teaching.asp](http://www.careers.cam.ac.uk/pdocsci/Academic/Teaching.asp)

The Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning ([www.cctl.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk)) offers training and networking opportunities, particularly through the Teaching Associates Programme (TAP). The Institute of Continuing Education also offers the ECR Teach programme ([www.ice.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ice.cam.ac.uk)).

**Are there any alternatives to a lectureship?**
There are very limited routes to a permanent job in academia that don’t involve teaching. In the life sciences and some physical science disciplines, and outside of the UK, there are some group leader opportunities in research institutes with no lecturing responsibilities. AHSS research-only jobs are very scarce, and are inaccessible to early
career academics. Thus, if you want to research but don’t want to teach, your career will consist of a series of fixed-term contracts.

There’s no particular reason why you shouldn’t embark on a postdoc research career without the aspiration of eventually becoming a lecturer, provided that you are realistic about the choice you are making: you are effectively choosing an on-going state of precarity that involves always needing to have an eye on the next grant, the next project, the next institution to which you might have to move. And you are gambling on the probability that you can keep working until retirement, or until you make a career change, without ever having a permanent contract. Some people are energised by this flexibility and change; some are horrified by the instability and risks: it’s a personal decision.
6. Publish wisely and well

How many publications do you need in order to get a fellowship? Or a lectureship? How many conference papers should you have given? How many invited talks or guest lectures?

In some ways, these questions are impossible to answer – how long is a piece of string? It depends on your discipline, your specific research, your long-term publication plans, your career aspirations, and so on. So use the following points to guide you:

1. You need some objective indicators of quality
   However great your PhD or fellowship project, however much your supervisor or mentors are impressed by what you’re doing, the ultimate test of your research is submitting it for review by impartial academic colleagues. At its most basic level, this is why researchers need to put their work out there: passing a peer-review process provides objective evidence that your work is good enough to become part of the academic discourse in your field. And for all the legitimate complaints that might be raised against the peer-review system, it’s still the dominant method used to assess quality, so you can’t afford to ignore it.

2. Invest in the right things
   Also known as: quality not quantity. This varies from discipline to discipline. Generally speaking, however, one article in the top-ranking peer-reviewed journal in your field is worth more to you than three or four in low ranking journals or chapters in edited collections. Likewise, book reviews may be a signal that you are a good member of your academic community, but they can be time-consuming and – put bluntly – they add almost no value to a list of your publications. Similarly, it doesn’t serve you well to give a paper at the same graduate symposium every year if you’ve never spoken at the main annual conference in your field. No amount of ‘good service’ will reliably substitute for major gaps in your CV.
7. Manage your career: consider the alternative options

Some good news: the chances are that you will be able to stay in academia if you want to. Around two-thirds of Cambridge postdocs pursue another academic position after their time at Cambridge. The question is less whether you will be able to stay in academia than it is what compromises you are willing to make along the way. Where in the world are you willing to work, and at what kind of institution? The more selective you are, the more competitive it is likely to be.

In particular, it’s important to be realistic about your short and medium-term prospects: you are likely to need to take at least one fixed-term contract after your PhD, and many people do more than one. Of the AHSS researchers who stayed in academia after completing their PhD, 65% were on fixed-term contracts. In the Sciences, we know that around 40% of postdocs obtained an established academic position immediately after their contract at Cambridge, i.e. either a permanent lectureship/faculty position, or else a fixed-term career development fellowship to start their own group.

Academia is an extremely competitive job market. It’s normal for a single UK lectureship opening to attract more than 100 applications, and a US tenure-track faculty position might even attract over 1000. Fellowships typically have a success rate of around 5-30%. Those who are determined to be successful will also need to be flexible about where in the world they find a permanent job.

With this in mind, it makes sense to consider what your alternative options might be if, ultimately, you decide that an academic career will not be for you after all. And if you do pursue the academic path, you can do so in the knowledge that you have fully explored your options and have made an informed decision.

The Careers Service can help you to explore career options outside academia through our website as well as our programme of workshops and events. And you can book a confidential one-to-one appointment with an adviser at any time.
8. Further support

Support within Cambridge

**Researcher Development Programme (PPD)**
[www.rdp.cam.ac.uk](http://www.rdp.cam.ac.uk)
Transferable skills and professional development for research students and staff, including time management, networking, leadership development, the Teaching Associate Programme, etc.

**Office of Postdoctoral Affairs**
[www.opda.cam.ac.uk](http://www.opda.cam.ac.uk)
Supports postdoctoral research staff throughout their time in Cambridge, including ‘Getting Connected’, an induction event for all new research staff; and a mentoring scheme.

**Postdocs of Cambridge Society (PdOC)**
[www.pdoc.cam.ac.uk](http://www.pdoc.cam.ac.uk)
Official society for postdoctoral research staff and JRFs. Support with career development, contract research conditions, college affiliation, and social and sporting issues.

**CRASSH Postdoctoral Researcher Forum**
[www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/programmes/postdoctoral-researcher-forum](http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/programmes/postdoctoral-researcher-forum)
Support for AHSS researchers: resources for career development and intellectual invigoration.

**Research Operations Office**
[www.research-operations.admin.cam.ac.uk](http://www.research-operations.admin.cam.ac.uk)
Practical guidance on costing projects, application processes, and access to the ResearchProfessional database
[www.researchprofessional.com](http://www.researchprofessional.com)

**AHSS Research website**
[www.ahssresearch.group.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ahssresearch.group.cam.ac.uk)
Information and resources for AHSS researchers, a downloadable funding booklet, and contact details for departmental Research Facilitators and Research Grants Administrators.
Counselling Service
www.counselling.cam.ac.uk
Self-help resources and courses, e.g. mindfulness, assertiveness, reflective practice, stress at work.

Support beyond Cambridge

Vitae
www.vitae.ac.uk
National organisation responsible for the development of researchers; lots of resources and some national events.

The Professor Is In
www.theprofessorisin.com
Careers advice particularly useful for those applying for jobs in the US. An appointment with Karen or her team costs money, but there are a lot of free resources on her website. The Careers Service has a borrowable copy of Karen’s book The Professor Is In.