Researching new Principal Investigator’s (PIs) perceptions of their career development: institutional implications

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Motivation – why?

- Becoming a Principal Investigator (PI) is a key aspiration for postdoctoral researchers

- Lack of empirical research about how to prepare for this significant ‘leadership’ transition

- Research question = “What are the challenges faced by researchers as they move from doing research under close supervision to having more autonomy once research independence has been achieved?”
Navigating the Career Hairpin

About the research project

‘Navigating the Career Hairpin’ seeks to find out how researchers prepare for and deal with the significant career transition from being a postdoctoral researcher to achieving research independence by becoming a Principal Investigator (PI). The research specifically looks at the time period from when researchers started their PhD to obtaining their first substantial grant as PI. The project will develop resources to support the personal, professional and career development of postdoctoral researchers and will provide data to inform researcher and educational development policy and practice.

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Project rationale

Globally, the number of postdoctoral researchers is increasing and the length of the postdoctoral period is lengthening. The postdoctoral period is when individuals are expected to further develop their scholarly independence, their scholarly identity and their academic career trajectory yet their experiences of gaining a permanent position in academia are relatively under-examined. There is also little evidence on which to base changes in policy and practice in order to facilitate their advancement.

Project methodology

Three research intensive Universities are participating in the research study: University of Cambridge and Imperial College London in the UK and Leiden University in the Netherlands. Data are being collected at an individual level through the in-depth interview method and at an institutional level using a template in order to capture the policies, funding and professional and career development support offered.

Project outputs
Process – how?

- Interviewed 46 PIs from University of Cambridge, Imperial College London & Leiden university, Netherlands (29 STEMM [18M 11F] 17 AHSS, [12M 5F]

- Coding and analysing the interviews and journey plots using MAXQDA software package

- Analysing the CV’s of the 46 PIs
Outcomes – so what?

- Provide ‘evidence based’ advice to postdoctoral/early career researchers through workshops and programmes
- Inform Emerging Research Leaders’ Development Programme (ERLDP) and PPD postdoc/PI development ‘curriculums’ now and in the future
- Provide strategic and policy guidance on key areas of focus to Researcher Development, HR, Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPDA) & League of Research Universities (LERU)
Current analysis

- Any common patterns in career pathways?
- Any notable differences between STEMM and AHSS career pathways?
- Time taken from start of PhD to obtaining first substantial grant as PI /permanent academic position
- Number of international career moves made before becoming a PI?
- Importance of PhD host institution and networks in subsequent career story
- Understanding the link between personal and professional lives of researchers
Challenges of getting grant

- Securing support & feedback on grant ideas & proposals
- Knowing about the grant funding landscape, e.g. eligibility criteria
- Coping with constant rejection
- Dealing with insecurity of employment linked to interface of personal and professional life
Challenges once grant has been obtained

- Pressure to continually perform whilst maintaining passion for research
- Transition to research leadership, e.g. dealing with people, budgets & complex projects and collaborations
- Difficulty of obtaining permanent position linked to interface of personal and professional life
Institutional implications