

Career support for researchers

– A guide for PIs

The College attaches great importance to personal and professional development. In their role as line managers of researchers, PIs are expected to engage in regular careers development discussions with researchers, to help them reflect on their skillset and plan their career goals.

This tip sheet is designed to support you as a PI in having these regular career discussions.

1. Timing of Conversations

A focused career conversation does not have to be long. An effective coaching conversation can happen in 15-30 minutes.

The frequency and timing of the career conversations you have with your research staff will be up to you to decide on a case-by-case basis and here are some factors for you to consider:

- **At the start of a contract**

Starting a new role can be overwhelming and any discussion about careers may not be effective. Signpost to resources at the [PFDC](#) and encourage them to sign up for the PFDC newsletter to stay informed.

- **During the contract**

This can happen in two instances.

- **At the request of the researcher** – Some researchers will feel confident in approaching you to request a career conversation but not all will. Proactively invite the researcher to a conversation about their career from time to time.
- **During the ARC process** - The [Annual Review Conversations \(ARC\)](#) take place annually. Although it might not be an ideal setting for an extended career conversation it could be a starting point. There is a space for the researchers to reflect on career support and development needs and the toolkit has questions you might want to explore.

- **Towards the end of a contract**

The end of a contract can focus the mind on career planning but is not the ideal time for a first conversation about careers. These should happen mostly during the contract.

2. Having Effective Career Conversations

Take a supportive, non-directive approach

- Avoid assumptions about what individuals may want to do.
- Show interest in how your researchers are developing their career plans.
- Encourage researchers to use the support available at Imperial.
- Be available to help where appropriate. The researcher ultimately remains responsible for their own career decision-making.

Mentor, give feedback or challenge where appropriate

- You can act as a mentor if a researcher is leaning towards an academic career by supporting them in writing research proposals or succeeding in academic interviews. You can also suggest they find a mentor outside the academic space.
- At times you may need to challenge some unrealistic assumptions, for example, that a contract will be extended.
- When giving feedback or challenging assumptions, it is best to be honest, clear, and constructive. It is also important to be mindful of the impact your feedback may have on the other person.

Ask open questions and encourage reflection

In a career conversation, open questions will give the researcher space to be reflective. You don't need to have the answers to these questions, as they are designed to get the other person thinking.

Here are some useful open questions:

- What are your thoughts about longer-term career plans?
- How would you like your career to develop over the next 5 years?
- What options have you thought about so far?
- How do you think you could generate some more ideas?
- What are the pros and cons?
- How realistic is this for you?
- What steps do you need to take to make this achievable?
- What skills and experience do you need to develop to take the next step in your career?
- Are there any ways in which I can help you in your career development?
- What is a realistic timeframe to get this done?
- How could you contact people working in careers you are interested in moving into?
- What or who could help you to get to where you'd like to be?
- What next steps will you take after this meeting to develop your career?
- Is there anything that could make it difficult for you to take these steps?
- When would be a useful time for us to meet again to discuss this?

Signpost to appropriate sources of advice and support

[PFDC](#)

Free and confidential support to all Imperial researchers through one-to-one appointments, mock interviews, courses, and online guidance. Help with career planning for all career paths.

[Imperial Enterprise Lab](#) and [ICON](#)

For researchers who may be interested in becoming an entrepreneur or doing consultancy.

[Career Moves Online Toolkit](#)

People and Organisational Development (POD) at Imperial provide career support for Imperial staff through their Career Moves workshop, booklet, and interactive toolkit.

[Imperial College Careers Service](#)

Offer Imperial researchers up to two career discussions per year. Information on [the Careers Service website](#).

3. Resources for PIs

[Management and Leadership Development at Imperial](#)

There are a variety of management and leadership development pathways available at Imperial through POD. You can access training in many aspects of managing people, including how to give feedback, coaching skills, influencing skills and mentoring.

[Micro-coaching for managers](#)

POD offers micro-coaching support for managers at Imperial. This is a confidential process where you can access a 20 minute, one to one session to help you think through your options. This could be useful in a range of situations, including in preparing for a career conversation with someone you manage.

[Having effective conversations](#)

The Personal Tutors' guide at Imperial contains guidance on how to have effective conversations through the technique of motivational interviewing. Motivational interviewing is designed to help individuals to achieve their goals and the technique can be used in a range of situations, including career conversations with researchers. You can also look at the resources POD has for [effective communication skills](#).

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