

Pathways: professional roles in higher education

Destination data show that just over a quarter of postdocs who choose not to pursue an academic career stay working in the higher education sector – in a wide range of roles supporting the research and teaching objectives of universities, funders, policy makers, public sector bodies, and so on. In fact, it is the most common career path for postdocs after academia.

This tip-sheet suggests five steps on the pathway to a professional role in higher education. The advice here is primarily intended for postdocs who are just beginning to explore their options.

1. Be prepared to shift identity

What most appeals about staying in higher education after stepping off the academic path can also be its biggest pitfall. Working in a sector where your previous experience as a postdoc is understood and valued is clearly attractive, but it's important to recognise that **you are still making a significant career change**.

You have to make an identity shift: you will not be an academic scientist anymore, nor will you be recognised as one by those around you – including, perhaps, former colleagues.

This kind of identity shift is not always straightforward, and it's not accomplished in a single decision:

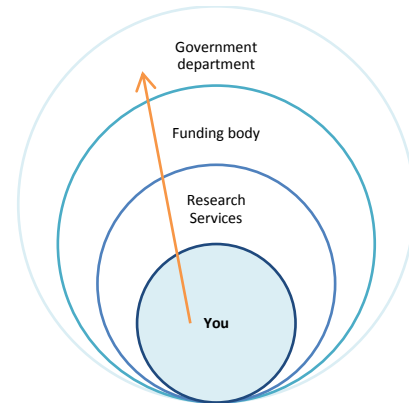
- You cannot find out what you need to know by self-reflection – instead, **start by looking outside yourself**. Investigate what is out there and see how you respond.
- **Allow yourself a period of indecision** – some days you'll want to stick with what you're currently doing, some days you'll want to change. That's OK. It can take a while to move from old to new.
- Identify **small actions that you can take now**, e.g. side projects, voluntary positions, new activities outside work related to your potential new area of work. Think of them as important experiments without binding commitment.

2. Understand your network

The best place to start is to **map the people who are already in your network**. In carrying out your research and any teaching duties, who else in the university do you interact with? For example:

research administration, grants management, commercialisation, knowledge exchange, lab management, technical support, public engagement, science communication, student services, training and development, careers support...

Who do those contacts interact with in order to do their work? Draw your extended network:



Talk to people in order to gather information. Who else has made the transition from hands-on academic work? What's their advice? Do they know someone else you could speak to? Is it possible to **shadow someone** for a day, to see what else their job involves?

3. Search for vacancies

Relevant vacancies in the UK and (to some extent) in the rest of the world are regularly advertised on jobs.ac.uk and the Times Higher Education website.

If you are searching in a particular geographical area, bookmark the jobs listings of specific local universities or set up email alerts.

4. Translate your skills

Commonly sought competencies include:

- knowledge of current issues in research and teaching – including policy and key debates. (Read the *Times Higher* and *The Guardian*.)
- administration and project management
- team work, collaboration, relationship building
- communication – especially report writing.

5. Prepare your application

You will need a well-tailored two-page CV. In most cases, it's a good idea to leave out your publications. Refer to our tip-sheet on **skills-based CVs**. If you are asked to write a **cover letter**, stick to one page. Refer to our tip-sheet for advice on structure and tone.

Book a **one-to-one** with the PFDC to go through your application: pfdc-support@imperial.ac.uk.

