



## Role of a postdoctoral fellow

A postdoctoral fellowship is a distinct stage of academic development that marks the transition from supervised trainee to independent researcher. A postdoctoral fellowship builds on the technical and conceptual foundations of a PhD but broadens the research scope and professional training by providing opportunities to develop in dimensions including intellectual leadership, scholarly output, research funding, engagement with the professional community, and the development of collaborations.

A core expectation is intellectual ownership. In addition to executing research, postdoctoral fellows are expected to identify questions, shape projects, build collaborations, and contribute to a broader research agenda, marking a shift from contributing to a defined project towards defining a program of research.

Publications remain the main indicator of progress, with a stronger emphasis on leadership on the part of the fellow. Fellows are expected to initiate and drive projects, take on first-author roles, expand collaborations, and maintain a steady output of high-quality work.

The expectation for professional development includes engaging with the professional community, e.g., organization of activities at professional conferences, reviewing papers, visiting other departments and knowledge mobilization and public or community engagement, which are increasingly expected under tri-agency framing. Training in open science, data management, and the responsible conduct of research is also a standard part of this stage. Research is conducted within a community and the ability to frame and communicate ideas in a way that is compelling to other people is important. As appropriate, a postdoctoral fellow is also expected to engage with research support, e.g., applying for fellowships, contributing to grant proposals, and learning how to frame ideas in a way that is both compelling and fundable. This reflects the reality that sustaining a research program requires both strong ideas and the ability to secure resources. Postdoctoral fellows also often take on informal mentorship roles, supporting students and junior researchers. This helps develop supervisory skills and reinforces the shift toward more independent and leadership-oriented work.

Collaboration is central to the role. Postdoctoral fellows work closely with their supervisor, contributing to ongoing projects and co-authoring papers, while also participating in the broader intellectual environment of the group. The supervisor provides mentorship, continuity, and access to established lines of work. At the same time, fellows are expected to build collaborations beyond their immediate setting. External collaborations may involve



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interdisciplinary work, partnerships across institutions or with industry, or participation in larger research networks and these help establish independence. Building them requires identifying complementary expertise, contributing meaningfully, and navigating issues like authorship and timelines. A key challenge is balancing these, both contributing meaningfully within an existing program while developing work that extends beyond it.

Research goes hand in hand with career preparation. Postdoc appointments usually run two or three years, and the finite clock imposes real choices about what to complete and where to continue. Fellows are expected to forge a unique research identity and to prepare the materials needed for the next step, whether it be a research statement, teaching philosophy and job talk for the academic market or its equivalent in another sector. Many fellows also undertake teaching in some form, be it guest lectures, co-supervision of graduate students or sessional courses, as a record limited to research can be a liability on the faculty market.

Finally, postdoctoral fellowships are relatively unstructured. There are few formal milestones, and progress is judged mainly through outputs—papers, grants, and collaborations. This requires a high degree of self-direction: setting priorities, managing time, and maintaining momentum.

Overall, the expectations of a postdoctoral fellow go beyond polishing technical skill. They involve developing independence, building and leading collaborations, and beginning to sustain a coherent program of research. It is a critical stage for consolidating expertise, expanding networks, and preparing for the next step.