

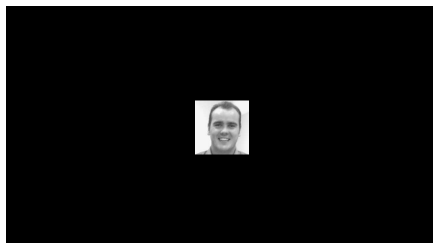
Postdocs: Your Future Is in YOUR Hands!

By [Jonathan Dando](#) | Aug. 30, 2002, 8:00 AM

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Are you calling me a postdoc?

I find the title slightly insulting. Most institutes define the postdoctoral appointment as an additional training period, but we should not forget what a postdoc is. We are in fact doctors and professionals, yet we are in the only profession that, even after we become professionally qualified, continues to recognise us as, well, students. (Do not give me that 'everybody is a student of life' story—that is just an easy cop out!) I have a lot of friends who are qualified in other professions. Upon receiving their professional qualification they were presented with more responsibility, higher wages, and better working conditions. They all work in private enterprise, of course.



So it seems that the problem lies with academia—not enough money for salaries and projects, poor infrastructure to support the staff it has, and poorer motivation. You dedicate your life to the pursuit of knowledge and to educating the next generation so that it might continue the endeavour, but if this is completely undersupported, then it becomes a fight for scraps which you receive piecemeal. The only meritocracy is based on the quality of your publications, which like many things in life is in turn based on luck, timing, and political connections, not necessarily the quality of your work.

But this is not news. As junior scientists, you therefore need to ask yourselves why you want to enter the system. We know it is underpaid, incredibly political, difficult to survive in, and has few open positions; the list is long. On top of this, the existing full-time members of the profession seem not to be happy. Personally, I am not so sure I want the job of university professor. The ones I have spoken to make it sound like a very long headache. While governments tighten their money belts, particularly in Europe, under the existing systems they know that they can lower wages, offer fewer full-time positions, and so forth. Reform, therefore, is not needed exclusively at the postdoc level. Reform needs to be more enveloping and far reaching. For example, ask somebody from a French state-sponsored research institute, or the same for Italy, Spain, Poland, Mexico, or Brazil, if they have 'too many' postdocs, or enough people in the universities to teach and train undergraduates and postgraduates.

Having a professional qualification would imply one has some level of intelligence, which would include the ability to reason. If it all seems so bad, why do we expend so much energy, writing articles like this and fighting to try and get in? Ultimately every career structure is a pyramid, the higher you go, the fewer positions there are. 'Too many chiefs, not enough Indians' is a recipe for disaster in any enterprise, and ultimately somebody has to take the final decision and be accountable for it.

So what are the options, on top of some fairly extensive reform? It is argued that there are too many PhD students. This is actually funny. How can anyone reasonably argue that the system is overwhelmed by people fighting to get a job where you study for 4 years, earn almost nothing during the study period, and finally become professionally qualified only to find yourself in the position of being unemployed, or employed only on short-term contracts?

What options should the PhD. The time that needs to be addressed is the question of

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I think everyone should do a PhD. The issue that needs to be addressed is the question of what you do with it and the attitude of PhDs themselves. Just because you are professionally qualified does not make you a better person, nor does it entitle you to a full-time job, and it certainly does not make you a natural manager. When you have reached a stage when you actually have some pearl of wisdom to divulge to the upcoming students, then you can have a full-time position. You've seen it and done it, which brings knowledge, experience, and insight. Flying around in a "holding pattern" waiting for a position to open up seems somewhat worrying for the future generations, because it teaches the next generation to do the same, rather than to go out and fight the system.

I like the idea of mental liberty, something my PhD gave me more of, especially since we live in a society which seems to do a pretty good job of limiting it. So be a little anarchic, expand your horizons, push the limits, aim for instability. The solution? There are more than 1400 start-up companies in the United States, more than 2000 in Europe, and lots more in Japan and Australia. And the political systems we elect want to generate more. All of these companies are crying out for skilled talent. As far back as the 18th century the Irish economist Richard Cantillon described entrepreneurs as the principal agent of economic growth and renewal, whose role is to support society--so it's not just about the money. Science is about being innovative, creative, insightful, dynamic--this is unlikely to be achieved without an inspired desire, which will not happen if you go to the same place every day for the rest of your life. I know this opinion will be outright revolutionary to some, but maybe instead of sitting in our own "merde" and saying it smells we should just stop buying into the system.

I think overall we should stop complaining. Ask whether teachers, nurses, medics, and social workers feel they have a great deal. The government's basic job is to offer security and justice. If you want more full-time positions, then pay more tax, eliminate the military, or something. But here you enter "the human condition" argument which is not particular to science. Instead we could redirect this negativity into positive energy and look for and create more options for ourselves.

After graduating from Portsmouth University, UK, with a degree in molecular biology, Jonathan Dando has spent the last 10 years working in academic and commercial enterprises in Austria, the United States, and Italy. He is presently nearing the end of a postdoc in Paris.

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