

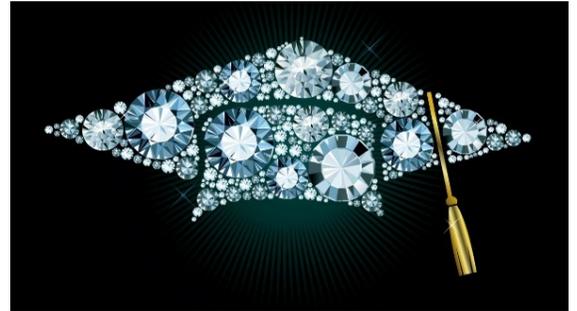
NTNU Postdoc Action Pilot 2017-2019

Midway report

December 2018

Introduction

By recommendation from the Research Committee at NTNU, the Rector made the decision in March 2017 to launch a dedicated “**Postdoc Action.**” NTNU intends to systematically support this talented group of people, both to help them develop good careers, improve the utilization of this important research resource, and strengthen prospects for recruitment to scientific positions in academia. The Postdoc Action Pilot is a strategic commitment developed in cooperation with the faculties.



A two-year pilot program was launched in autumn 2017 with 33 postdocs from all faculties. The participants are offered support in the form of template tools for performance appraisals and career plans, events and courses, a mentor, and the opportunity to apply for financial support for international mobility. The pilot participants are expected to give feedback to the working group (consisting of two Vice Deans from the Research Committee, two postdocs and a coordinator from the rector’s staff) during the pilot. After the pilot period, an evaluation will form the basis for a new postdoctoral policy and a revision of the existing postdoctoral regulations.

Five different events and courses have been held so far:

- 29.11.17 Introduction event. Contents: The aims of the commitment, getting to know each other, networking, mentoring, career planning. A small mini-course on research communication.
- 21.03.18 Event involving both postdocs and mentors. More input on mentoring.
- 23.05.18 Event focused on application writing
- 24.05.18 Course in PhD supervision
- 07.09.18 Exchange of experiences halfway in the pilot period. Course in innovation (TTO)

The midterm evaluation focuses on the aims of the Postdoc Action as well as the various opportunities that the pilot group has been granted access to. The midterm evaluation will provide a foundation for further development of the Postdoc Action for the last year of the pilot in addition to giving guidelines for what will be most significant when the outcomes of the Postdoc Action are shared with all postdocs at NTNU.

Feedback from participant:

“I think it has helped me to start building a research career in terms of seeing the possibilities and perhaps gaining some confidence and knowledge about how to proceed. It has put me in a position now, where I am able to work towards an application for Norwegian Research Council and build on my networks to form a research collaborative within my research field.”

The diagram below shows percentage of postdoctoral participants responding on the midway evaluation about which aspects of the Postdoc Action have most beneficial.

Most valuable aspects of the Postdoc Action Pilot

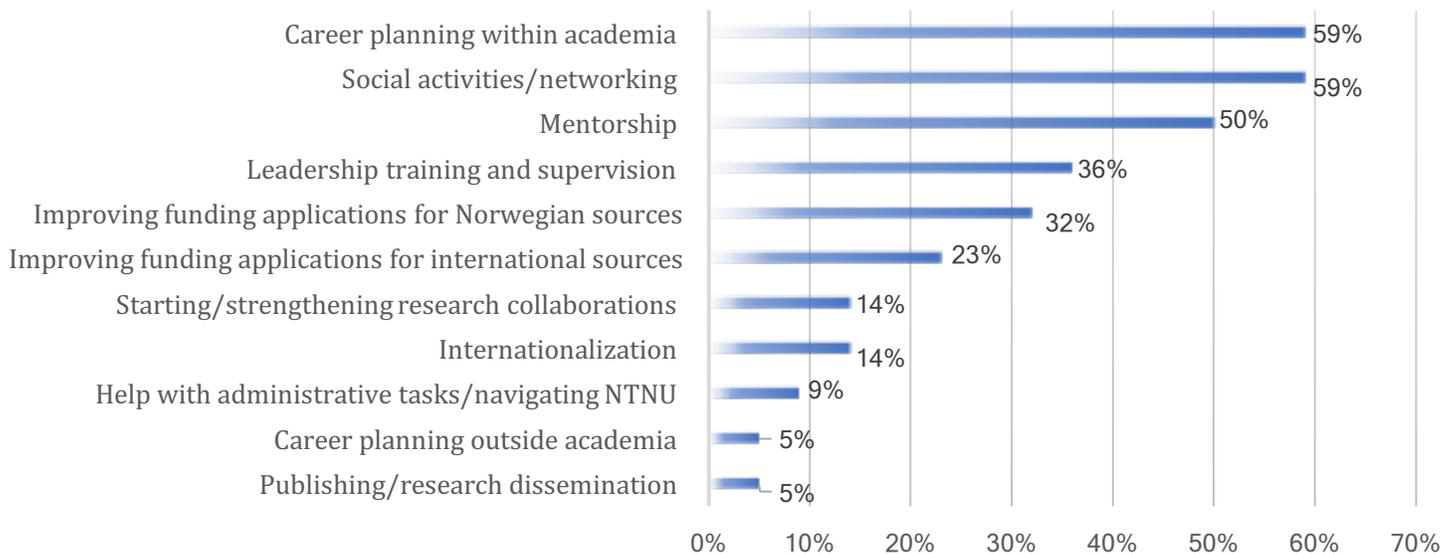


Photo of the postdocs at the event 7 September 2018

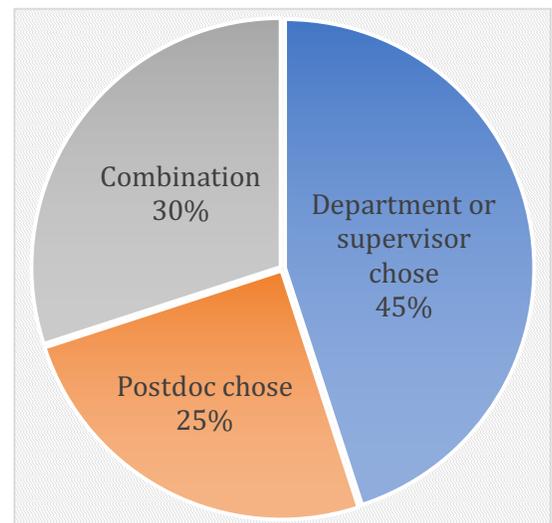
Participation

Participants are 61% international and 39% Norwegian citizens and range in age from 27 to 51 years old (average age 36 years). For three of four participants, this is their first postdoc fellowship. The current number of participants is 20, of which two-thirds responded to the midway assessment. Since the pilot started, 4 participants have left the pilot, and two new ones were invited to join in fall 2018. We have held four gatherings including courses and events. The overall participation rate has been 73%. There was very high participation for the first event and somewhat variable after that. Variation in the participation is possibly related to the topic of the event, but in general, postdocs are busy. To fill up the courses to approximately 35 participants, the pilot has therefore invited additional postdocs from outside the program to join for some of the courses

Mentoring

Before the Postdoc Action, just 30% of the participants had had a mentor. Now all the pilot participants have a mentor from NTNU through the end of 2019. 60% of participants did not know their mentor before the pilot, and in 75% of cases, the department or supervisor contributed to matching postdocs with mentors. Mentors tend to be employees at the same department (43%), another department at the same faculty (33%), or at another faculty (23%). Four of five mentors responded that they have a good relationship with the postdoc. 53% of the indicated that the postdoc takes the initiative to set up meetings, and 55% of postdoc participants say that it has been useful for career planning to have a mentor.

Some participants (15%) suggested that the resources for mentoring provided by the Postdoc Action were not sufficient. A number of mentors and mentees commented that they would like more events together.



Short version of feedback from participants and mentors

+ mentoring	- mentoring
“A rewarding experience for the mentor”	“Not clear what the mentee wants from me”
“Mentee has gained insights into academic life”	“Difficult to find a time”
“Want more events for mentors”	“No agenda from the mentor”
“Mentor may point out different issues than a supervisor”	“A supervisor should be able to do some of this work actually”
“Learn from different fields”	
“Very valuable insight from an unbiased perspective”	

International mobility

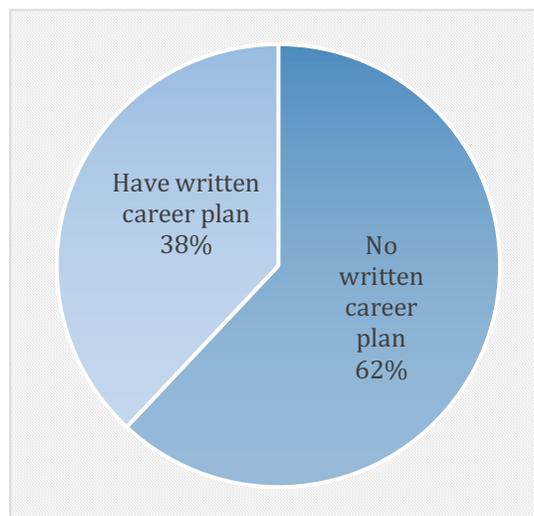
The Postdoc Action offers up to 50,000 NOK in support for researcher mobility, both outgoing and incoming. As of November 2018, four applications for research stays abroad have been approved by the Postdoc Action, to King’s College London, University of California, Los Angeles, Lawrence Berkeley National Lab in Berkeley, and EAFIT University in Medellín, Colombia. Approximately one in three participants responded that they are working on an application for research funds from Norwegian sources. The proportion applying for support from international sources, such as Horizon 2020, Marie Curie, and Fulbright, is around 24%. One in three have not started applying yet, but plan to do so, while 14% do not plan to apply. 45.5% received their PhD from NTNU, 9% from other Norwegian universities, and 45.5% abroad. 23% of the Norwegian participants have previously had a stay abroad of 3+ months.

Short version of feedback from participants:

Challenges with mobility for postdocs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Doesn’t make sense to go abroad for less than 3 months” • “My work is localized to Trøndelag” • “Parents with two small children” • “No scientific reason for me to visit collaborators (e.g., concrete experiment)” • “Have to focus on my grant here” • “Went abroad during my PhD” • “Rest of the family strongly prefers to stay here”

Career planning

Career development has been central for the Postdoc Action. Career planning involves gaining awareness and documentation to clarify career goals. Career plans should be consulted regularly and during the yearly employee dialogue. A total of 71% of participants have discussed career planning with their mentor, 71% with their group leader or professor, 43% with colleagues at their department, 24% with the department head, and 5% with other participants in the pilot. 62% have had or will have a yearly employee dialogue during 2018, but 38% do not plan to. So far, 38% of participants have a *written* career plan, and only 14% have used the template provided by the Postdoc Action. Participants disagreed about whether a written career plan is useful or relevant.



Short version of feedback from participants:

+ written career plan	- written career plan
“Assists in career and personal development”	“Have a career plan in my head”
“Can discuss with mentor/group leader”	“Too little time to focus on career development”
“A reference point”	“Mentor has not mentioned it”
“Keeps you on track”	“My goals have changed”
“Important to put time into thinking about the bigger picture”	“Postdocs cannot decide our own career path”
	“Being successful takes more than a written career plan”

Network

Before the Postdoc Action, postdocs at NTNU have not had any shared meeting places – physical or digital. There has also not been an Innsida channel, email list, website, or group events hosted by NTNU. Many participants responded that meeting other postdocs has been the most valuable aspect of the Postdoc Action, together with mentoring. The gatherings have worked so well that some participants have expressed interest in organizing informal meet-ups between official events, especially for postdocs in the same or related fields.

“What has been most valuable/beneficial from the pilot?” (from midway evaluation)

- “I got to meet a lot of people from different disciplines, with a different view and new perspective.”
- “I believe the dialogs with my mentor have been most valuable. It has been helpful to discuss career plans with him, as well issues relevant to my project.

Courses

Over half of participants replied that it is not easy to prioritize course attendance due to other obligations, although many do make an effort to attend. The majority replied that participating in short courses (1-2 days) on specific topics is useful for career development and that the course offering is good. We received good feedback on the PhD supervision course with Prof. Kari Smith, and there is interest in taking the pedagogy course (PEDUP). Some elements of the course offering have been less relevant for some participants (for example patenting). Others express a wish to have specialized courses within their research fields. Overall, there is a general agreement that courses are not only needed, but are valuable. The diverse research interests of the postdocs, as well as their varying expectations about future careers influence their preferences for what courses should be offered. Several participants suggest introducing networking activities early in the program to more quickly get to know one another.

Feedback from participant:

“The most beneficial was that there were days and hours set off in the calendar for focusing on what I wanted to do with my postdoc. It is hard to find time for this during busy project work.”

Challenges ahead

The greatest challenge for participants seems to be lack of time. Some of them do not show up at the events, explaining that their daily research work is too demanding for them to allow themselves time off.

Even though almost everyone involved agrees on the need for mentorship, mentoring does not function optimally for everyone. One reason for this can be that the mentor and the postdoc do not connect well, which again can be due to time and different expectations. An initial meeting between the mentor and postdoc to clarify expectations and plan the cooperation could help solve these issues. In addition, the postdocs should participate actively choosing their own mentors.

The flow of information could be improved, but the individual postdoc must shoulder much of the responsibility personally. We are still lacking communication channels such as a common webpage, a channel on Innsida and an email list. Through collaboration with the communications department, the Postdoc Action has worked to make up for this shortcoming by developing two different information pages on Innsida. The first one gives a general presentation of the Postdoc Action and its key features. The second consists of other information useful for postdoctoral fellows' career planning. We are also planning a web portal specially adapted for postdocs (including potential applicants to postdoctoral positions at NTNU).

<https://innsida.ntnu.no/wiki/-/wiki/English/The+Postdoc+Action+Pilot+Project>

<https://innsida.ntnu.no/wiki/-/wiki/English/Career+support+and+development+for+postdocs>

Based on our good experiences with the pilot, there should be an email list specifically for postdocs. A listserv would be a measure to engage in a continuing dialogue with colleagues, and can also facilitate internal communications between postdocs and provide them with the means to initiate smaller, informal gatherings, as some of them have shown an interest in. A set of rules for the use of this listserv would have to be established to avoid unwanted volume. A postdoc channel on Innsida should also be considered.

Input from the committee

The Postdoc Action, its status, and where to go from here, have been addressed several times by the University Research Committee, which the vice deans for research at all the faculties are members. The head of departments were contacted in connection with the performance appraisals, and mentors and head of departments were involved in connection with career plans for everyone. Section leaders from all faculties have, in addition, received the same information. Still, the feedback from the postdocs, and to some extent also from the mentors, indicates that the information and involvement at the faculty level in particular, but also at the department level,

could have been better. It took a very long time (approximately 6 months) before everyone had a mentor. Some participants wish that the department were more in touch with the Postdoc Action.

Feedback from participant:

“Departments should be more connected to the program and follow up work”

The working group has observed that turnout at events and courses sometimes has been low, and that several people signed up without attending. Even though not everyone is expected to attend every event, the opportunity to take part in a postdoc program should involve a commitment to participate fully.

Feedback on the Postdoc Action’s events and courses have varied based on the different postdocs’ perspectives (see diagram on page 2) With the pilot halfway through, there is little reason to change the concept of courses and events. We must still keep in mind postdocs who make plans for diverse kinds of careers. In November 2018, we offered a course in leader development for postdocs (a two-day event), in February 2019 we will focus on pedagogical skills, in June 2019 a career conference (with NTNU Alumni) for PhDs and postdocs is planned, and finally in August 2019, there will be a joint event for mentors and postdocs. Topics for the events include international mobility, gender equality, interdisciplinarity, and research ethics. Most participants want more networking activities, either at the events or at other venues (social gatherings or online). The Postdoc Action has considered offering the participants grants to organize this themselves.

Results from the midway evaluation offered some indications for which elements should be retained after the pilot concludes in fall 2019. An extension could build on different models.

Feedback from participant:

“I think most importantly that in the future, when this is offered to all post docs, courses must be offered when they are relevant in the post doc period.”

In one type of model, the postdoc can personally take responsibility and freely choose different career support tools (such as mentor, mobility support, career planning, and courses). Another option for a next step would be to set up a program over a set period (for instance 1-2 year) with a group of postdocs committed to actively participating in the program, which would include career support measures, events, and courses. This model is envisioned as a “fellowship” program for the most motivated postdocs and would involve requirements for participants. This would require applications and evaluation of the candidates, as well as a detailed follow-up plan through the program, which would have to be managed centrally.

Both these models respond to the postdoctoral fellows’ desire for increased networking and community. In the final phase of the Postdoc Action, a proposal for a revised postdoctoral regulation will be drawn up. This will form the basis for a new postdoctoral policy at NTNU. In this process, NTNU must refer to national guidelines and updates related to the postdoctoral position.

Conclusion and next steps

The midway evaluation shows that the Postdoc Action Pilot is on the right track as NTNU wishes to strengthen career measures specifically for this group. But it is challenging to give career support which reaches as many postdocs as possible. The activities and tools which have received the best score in the midway evaluation should be continued and offered to all postdocs at NTNU.

The Research Committee is of the opinion that NTNU should carefully consider a further investment in postdocs that includes an application to the Marie Curie Fellowship. An application can build upon the measures developed within the Postdoc Action Pilot, but the structure in terms of topics and format will have to be defined.

Postdoc Action committee

Vice Dean Bjørn Myskja (HF) and Vice Dean Pål Romundstad (MH)

Postdoctoral fellows Gunnar D. Hatlehol, Kam Sripada, and Katrien De Moor (on leave)

Coordinator Ragnhild Lofthus (Rector's staff - research)