

Postdoc and Fellows Champions

Case studies

These case studies are based on seven one-on-one conversations, carried out by external consultant Elena Virlan, with some of the [Postdoc and Fellows Champions](#), highlighting their experiences and motivations in their own words.

The case studies aim to celebrate and showcase the valuable contributions that the Champions make to their department's early career researcher communities, as well as the passion they bring to their roles. While the Champions have shared details about the projects and initiatives they have been involved in, many of these were collaborative efforts with their departments or [Postdoc and Fellows Reps](#).

Name: [Pablo Brito-Parada](#)



“It is our duty as members of academic staff to go back to the time where we were in the same position as the postdocs and fellows and do our best to support that community in any way that we can.”

Department: Earth Sciences & Engineering

How long have you been a Champion? Since 2020.

Why did you become a Champion?

“I was a postdoc myself for a brief period, and then a fellow for a long time, before I started a position at Imperial. All these at Imperial, so I guess I knew first-hand that both the postdoc

and the fellowship are an important transition period for one's career (...) that does benefit from a lot of support.”

“Postdoc and Fellow Champions have different strategies or different levels of involvement so I was very keen to try and contribute (...) Perhaps doing a bit more and engaging that community in the department. So (...) my own experience I guess is what motivated me. When I started as an academic it was suggested to me and I didn't hesitate to say yes.”

What do you enjoy about being a Champion?

“Supporting (...) young academics (...) those that are going through the transition (...) that is a very tricky period because (...) *[academia is]* difficult. (...) Positions are limited (...) fellowships are extremely competitive (...) *[so]* providing advice on applications (...) *[is]* very, very rewarding.”

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

“Postdoc Espresso (...) started in person *[before the pandemic]* and then moved online (...) 15-minute presentations *[from]* a couple of postdocs (...) and then a chance for people to discuss (...) This was very timely and important because (...) there are some opportunities to collaborate and people don't necessarily meet and find out what the others are doing. So we thought it was a good opportunity just to get people first to know each other in a relaxed context, but also going beyond the social aspect of the possible community, trying to identify any potential collaborations (...) During the pandemic (...) when people were feeling more isolated (...) we got quite a lot of interest from the community and we really engaged with a lot of people.”

“I tried to have individual conversations with all of them, precisely because of those fears that people were feeling isolated.”

“*[Securing]* funding from the department to get people doing small projects (...) independent from their PIs. (...) High speed collaboration events like (...) speed *[networking]* with people chatting to each other and moving around and trying at the end of the day to develop an idea and then apply for some funding. So those sorts of schemes were successful.”

“The Arthur Holmes grant (...) an internal fund (...) People can apply for up to £3,000 a year for activities (...) that benefit their career progression. (...) This could be anything from attending a conference to a workshop or doing a specific piece of research (...) that is independent of their PI. (...) I'm always on the panel and we have the postdoc reps and then

at least one or two invited postdocs (...) It's very popular (...) it has motivated a lot of people to try and do those independent projects that are good for them."

"Postdoc catch-up session (...) regular (...) postdoc and fellows meeting (...) there's always someone who presents"

"Departmental pay review for the postdocs (...) I'm part of the panel"

"Welcoming the new postdocs"

Why should someone be a Champion for the postdocs?

"I think it is (...) our duty as members of academic staff to (...) go back to the time where we were in the same position as *[the]* postdocs and fellows and (...) do our best to support that community in *[any]* way that we can."

"When you're working with your PI, *[it's]* always possible that you get isolated from everything else. If you don't have good support in your group, or if you don't have good support *[from]* your PI, you need someone to go to and (...) there is nothing else in our structure as a university for that to happen at the departmental level. (...) I see that as essential."

"We need to advocate first to our own departments, so that there are the right levels of support for the activities that we would like to allow to happen."

"*[There are]* specific areas of support that exist in the College (...) *[I]* think that as a Champion, it's important to be aware of those mechanisms."

"I think reaching the PI is very, very important."

Name: [Rafael Calvo](#)



*“We need to organise activities that are about creating community.
The role is about creating a social network.”*

Department: Dyson School of Design Engineering

How long have you been a Champion? Since September 2023.

Why did you become a Champion?

“I think supporting postdocs is really satisfying.”

“We are a young school (...) 10 years old (...) A lot of our academics are junior academics, so many of them will never have (...) supervised (...) So *[it's important to]* make sure that nobody falls between the cracks.”

What do you enjoy about being a Champion?

“*[Many]* postdocs are closer to or want to be lecturers. So I think my work has better impact (...) *[because]* I teach them about academic life.”

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

“Two meetings [*in the department*] with postdocs: (...) [*one*] more formal with the Head of School (...) [*and*] academics (...) The second one (...) a tea time get-together once per term (...) [*in the*] staff room that fits about 10 people (...) it's more informal. People feel more comfortable asking questions.”

“[*Promoting*] opportunities (...) 10 days of training (...) how to get their name in grants (...) championing the training that the PFDC (now ECRI) does (...) having informal conversations”

“We also (...) select a postdoc [*representative*] (...) [*It helps to*] get a sense of what postdocs want.”

“Another event (...) [*It's for*] PhD students, but we are extending that [*to postdocs*] (...) Posters [*presentations*] (...) The audience will come ask questions.”

“[*We*] have an industry advisory board coming (...) interact with the postdocs and students. (...) We have very good collaborations with them (...) very big tech companies.”

“Weekly seminar series (...) Postdocs talking about their projects [*to*] postdocs and PhD students (...) [*It*] creates a sense of community.”

“Sending the [*PFDC (now ECRI)*] newsletters [*to make the postdocs*] aware of the small grant opportunities or the training opportunities in PFDC (now ECRI).”

Why should someone be a Champion for the postdocs?

“Making sure that people don't fall between the cracks, meaning that everybody gets some kind of postdoc training, and everybody knows about the formal structure training that they have from the PFDC (now ECRI), and they can benefit from that.”

“We need to organise activities that are about creating community. The role (...) is about creating a social network.”

Name: [Juan Gallego](#)



“Helping young people flourish is rewarding.”

Department: Bioengineering

How long have you been a Champion? Since the end of 2023.

Why did you become a Champion?

“I care about research and career development (...) *[and]* supporting postdocs, so they know that there *[are]* options.”

“*[I like to]* provide guidance and resources, get them *[the postdocs]* to network.”

“I was a postdoc not so long ago and I remember this feeling that you are kind of alone fighting *[an]* uphill battle. You are a bit isolated (...) so it’s good to have (...) a network. Mentorship is one of the joys and privileges in an academic position.”

“Creating a better environment”

“Before I came here (...) I *[gave a]* talk about *[the]* process of application *[for a fellowship]*, giving guidelines, talking about *[my]* experience. (...) I do enjoy those things and I think it's important.”

“Listening to postdocs”

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

“Making decisions and allocating funding”

“PhD and postdoc appreciation day (...) a small networking event (...) for people to get together”

“Postdoc appreciation party”

“Postdoc coffee mornings”

“I'm discussing with them (...) opportunities *[for]* teaching.”

“Trying to listen to their concerns, discuss with them and (...) *[helping]* them escalate”

“*[Enabling postdocs to]* manage Master's projects (...) this is something that the department is developing during the summer”

“*[Having]* each person who joins us *[as]* postdoc be automatically added to an e-mail list where then the postdoc reps can advertise”

“The postdocs know that if they need me, they can just send me an e-mail or (...) message.”

Why should someone be a Champion for the postdocs?

“Academics (...) we've all been postdocs (...) It may be (...) the most enjoyable period of your academic life (...) You are independent (...) On the other hand (...) if you want to continue in academia (...) *[or]* if you want to go to industries (...) it's stressful.”

“Giving support to people who are in this (...) unique (...) time of their life.”

“Helping (...) young people flourish is rewarding.”

Name: [Stella Pedrazzini](#)

“I believe in championing for postdocs’ and fellows’ rights and creating initiatives that open more doors for them.”

Department: Materials

Why did you become a Champion?

“Before coming to Imperial I was a postdoc at Cambridge and I was chair of the postdoc committee there (...) Having that experience (...) I volunteered.”

“[Campaigning for] more support when applying for fellowships (...) for postdoc rights.”

“Fellows don’t necessarily have a permanent job to go to.”

“I believe in (...) championing for postdocs’ and fellows’ rights and creating initiatives that open more doors for them.”

“I can make things slightly better for them, even if it’s just one person at a time.”

What do you enjoy about being a Champion?

“Community creation aspects (...) you get to know all the postdocs and the different backgrounds.”

“It’s a very sociable role and I get to see all the good. (...) When we organise a symposium and (...) I’m the one giving out prizes (...) you get surrounded by really happy people.”

“Everything I do is (...) positive (...) Social events and supporting people (...) *[they]* really appreciate it.”

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

“I meet with my reps every two weeks. We have a coffee and we discuss things that the postdocs want to see.”

“We’ve run (...) career seminars, fellowship seminars, also careers outside of academia (...) seminars. Those were very, very popular, inviting industry contacts.”

“Career talks (*from*) Consultants and people who were postdocs here (...) Those have been some of our most popular events.”

“I run a scheme (...) called the Head of Department Fund (...) specifically for our postdocs. (...) Funds that lead the postdoc to (...) do their own research (...) independently from their PI (...) Within the department, we (...) fund some of the top ones that were not deemed fundable [*for the funds run by the PFDC (now ECRI)*].”

“I've organised [*seminars on*] how to apply for your own fellowship, how to apply for funding, how to do a costing.”

“We have a big social (...) a party at Eastside.”

“We have a yearly symposium (...) that's a really good opportunity. We have all the postdocs present for 15 minutes and then we have some of them make posters (...) the postdocs get to see each other's work, and (...) they win prizes, which then go on their CV (...) We usually use that to announce the winner of the Head of Department Fund as well.”

“We have minimum service terms that are required to access benefits like maternity leave and we had someone who was on a 2-month contract renewed every two months (...) so she didn't meet the minimum service contract (...) the department decided to (...) fully fund her maternity leave anyway”

“I sit on the research committee, which is very important for representing postdocs and fellows (...) EDI committees (...) Representation is very important on all of these committees because all these issues affect the postdocs and fellows.”

Why should someone be a Champion for the postdocs?

“To be passionate and interested in (...) trying to further their [*the postdocs*] rights (...) for trying to make their life slightly better (...) that's why I'm doing it.”

Name: [Veronique Azuara](#)



“When they feel like you listen to them, they feel recognised. Sometimes postdocs struggle with a lack of feeling valued and recognised.”

Department: Metabolism, Digestion and Reproduction

How long have you been a Champion? Since 2013.

Why did you become a Champion?

“Interested in the development of others”

“Management of people (...) the success of any project also comes from what other people bring to the project.”

“You decide to do these things as well based on your own experience as a postdoc, what may have been missing, what worked very well.”

“As you grow (...) you want to give back to *[the]* institution.”

“*[Being part of]* something bigger than me.”

“*[Contributing]* to culture and community.”

“Learn *[about]* myself through the process.”

“If you are in touch with postdocs not (...) from your group or your immediate environments, (...) you understand a bit more.”

What do you enjoy about being a Champion?

“The aspect I enjoy the most is to feel that people become empowered.”

“I like to listen to the ideas *[from postdocs]* and (...) helping (...) to basically see them grow through the process.”

“When they feel like you listen to them, they feel recognised (...) Sometimes postdocs struggle with (...) a lack of feeling valued and recognised.”

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

“Regular meetings with the postdocs reps (...) I wanted to know what they are doing, how they want to do it and how I can help them.”

“I've been involved with (...) the staff survey in my department. It was clear that there were (...) themes of loneliness (...) within the postdoc community. (...) and I started to think (...) what I can do (...) more globally.”

“I'm also an academic mentor (...) My mentee (...) had this idea to build up a postdoc black postdoc network (...) I think *[it's]* important not to necessarily do things yourself *[but]* to listen to initiative (...) to give the confidence and to help them to be empowered to put *[initiatives]* in place. *[The network]* was a great success (...) She asked me to proofread any documents she was putting forward for this network.(...) I helped her (...) to get some funding (...) She was nominated for an award from the PFDC (now ECRI).”

“In my department we are just starting (...) the ARC conversations (...) I think it's very important that postdocs engage with the process (...) We organised (...) dedicated sessions for that.”

“Reach *[out]* to PIs (...) *[The PFDC (now ECRI)]* have this code of practice (...) to highlight the responsibility of PIs and give advice and resources on how they can help (...) postdocs in their groups. I really try to advertise that as much as I can.”

“Research England funding from the PFDC (now ECRI) *[for a]* leadership programme (...) *[to create]* a sense of empowerment (...) I had sessions in person with all *[postdocs and fellows]* engaged in this programme. (...) *[to hear]* what they gained from the programme.”

Name: [Martin Rasmussen](#)



“The most motivating thing is to see that I can do something for others and can make a difference for them.”

Department: Mathematics

How long have you been a Champion? Started as a rep 15 years ago, been a Champion for over 5 years.

Why did you become a Champion?

“I loved to be a postdoc rep.”

“Reading proposals and trying to understand what needs to be communicated and to give proper advice.”

“I feel if I'm (...) having success with something, that really motivates me and (...) I see that my work really has an impact.”

“The most motivating thing is to see that I can do something for others and (...) can make a difference for them.”

What do you enjoy about being a Champion?

“The one-to-one support (...) you directly see that what you do really has an impact and helps (...) I find it extremely satisfactory because it gets immediate feedback that this is the right thing to do and that the help (...) is appreciated.”

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

“We give very strong support for grant applications and applications (...) outside academia. So we look through the CV, we look through the grant proposal. If the candidate gets invited, we conduct a mock interview. So this of course complements the support that the postdocs get from the Postdoc and Fellows Development Centre (now ECRI), but it is more Mathematics-specific.”

“We try to advertise what we are doing through the postdoc reps, so that they send some updates to the mailing list.”

“Mentorship programme (...) recommended by the EDI committee in our department.”

“Every now and then someone [*comes*] and asks for help. (...) So they know that they can do this (...) that we are very happy to support them with their queries and applications.”

“Grant application career event”

“Panel discussion with staff members in our department and postdocs and researchers, former staff members who went outside of academia, who changed their career and gave a different perspective (...) for postdocs, especially for those who do not necessarily want to stay in academia.”

Why should someone be a Champion for the postdocs?

“To go to a staff member and ask for help is (...) complicated. (...) It's important for Postdoc Champions to be as inclusive as possible. (...) Make sure that (postdocs) feel encouraged to come and to speak about all kinds of issues.”

“It's fantastic to work with young people and to see how they grow. (...) It's very rewarding to work with young people and to help them.”

Name: [Miriam Moffatt](#)



“That opportunity to feed into the initiatives of the PFDC (now ECRI) (...) If I wasn't a Champion, I wouldn't be aware of those sorts of initiatives.”

Department: National Heart & Lung Institute

Why did you become a Champion?

“[As a researcher] you were quite isolated (...) not knowing what your career options were (...) I was lucky, I had a fantastic mentor (...) [but] what do you do next and (...) are there options for funding?”

“I was asked by our Head of Department (...) I really wanted to get involved and learn more about the PFDC (now ECRI) and what they're offering.”

“Very much just wanting to do my bit to try and support early career researchers as best as possible.”

“Trying to support as best as possible (...) Not everyone is going to get the opportunity to be an academic (...) Trying to support them in that journey so that they understand what their options are.”

What do you enjoy about being a Champion?

"I very much enjoy the [*Champions*] meetings (...) so I can really hear about the updates and the changes happening (...) Where I'm located, in the Brompton campus, I do feel more isolated (...) I always enjoy when I get the opportunity to go to the Champions meetings (...) and the discussion about different things. (...) I've enjoyed very much the engagement with other Champions."

"I like the opportunities to feed into things at different points (...) When the PRDP form was not suitable for postdocs (...) the PFDC (now ECRI) recognised that. (...) That opportunity to feed into the initiatives of the PFDC/ECRI (...) If I wasn't a Champion, I wouldn't be aware of those sorts of initiatives."

What projects and initiatives have you been involved in?

"Careers day (...) [*making*] postdocs and fellows aware of it (...) [*We had*] the (then) PFDC come along and [*deliver*] a whole session."

"We now have an introductory letter to any new postdoc who joins. (...) We encourage them keep this as a reference so that you have all your information to hand if ever you need to contact people (...) It's quite comprehensive."

"The NHLI Foundation Pilot Award (...) charitable money (...) to invest in travel awards [*to*] support our postdocs (...) We have a call (...) every term for travel awards and those do prove popular. (...) We treat it very much like a grant application, [*with*] rules and regulations (...) awards of up to £5000."

"We [*The NHLI Champions and Research Manager*] support the [*Postdoc and Fellows*] Committee. (...) It's really nice having watched that evolve."

"In the early days (...) we would also score the applications of (...) [*the*] Pilot Award, and now (...) the Committee do (...) we only step in if [*they need help*]."

"Q&A with [*Head of Department*] (...) We asked for questions in advance so that [*they*] had time to prepare."

"Science and culture seminar series (...) They used to have one every Friday. It's had (...) a pause and they'll be restarting (...) The Committee [*talked*] about what the Committee does, the funding opportunities (...) [*such as the*] Pilot Award (...) We're asking how could we

communicate that better (...) we could have a few people talking about how the Awards helped them and (...) get the early career researchers thinking about the importance of (...) these smaller sums of money.”

“We also did a postdoc survey (...) mental health of postdocs and all the pressures (...) Trying to find out (...) the grant that they're funded on (...) seeing the research outline to understand (...) the timelines of the grant funding (...) contract end date.”

“NHLI Postdoc and Fellows Day (...) I was using all my links with former postdocs and (...) they had some sort of industry connection (...) that was refreshing for the *[participating]* postdocs (...) It's really nice seeing someone who's been at NHLI before being so open and honest about their journey and where they've got to and seeing how happy they are.”

“Trying to maintain websites that have useful information (...) about the activities that we do for postdocs.”

Why should someone be a Champion for the postdocs?

“Interacting with a group of like-minded individuals who care about (...) these early career investigators (...) Making sure they progress in their career.”

“Supporting people in their next step.”