

Postdocs in the Netherlands: Work experiences and Career prospects

Inge van der Weijden (CWTS, Leiden University) & Christine Teelken (Organisation Sciences, VU Amsterdam). February 2020

The purpose of this report is to understand how, in the context of labour market instability, postdoctoral researchers experience their working conditions and their (career) prospects and opportunities. We define postdocs here as ‘newly qualified researchers with PhDs, working autonomously in research at universities or related institutions but without a tenured contract’.

In 2019, an online questionnaire was distributed among postdocs, consisting primarily of UFO categories ‘onderzoeker 3’ and ‘onderzoeker 4’, from eight Dutch universities: Eindhoven University, Erasmus University, Leiden University, Radboud University, Tilburg University, Twente University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; and Wageningen University. A sample of 676 postdocs, 51% male, 48% female and 1% gender neutral, responded to the questionnaire. The average age of the respondents was 34 years. 46% had the Dutch nationality, and 54% were international postdocs from different countries. 32% of the respondents had children. Postdocs worked in different fields: natural sciences (32%), social sciences and humanities (30%), medical and health sciences (21%), engineering and technology (17%). The average postdoc duration was 31 months. Nearly all respondents (97%) obtained their PhD between 2009 and 2019.

More than half of the respondents expressed positive experiences concerning their current work as postdocs. They generally liked the content of their work, their colleagues and the amount of research time. However, despite these positive experiences, nearly all respondents felt that several aspects of their work are in serious need of improvement:

- Lack of career prospects in academia
- Publication and grant pressure
- Work Life Balance
- Lack of support from institute or organisation
- Combination of insecurity of prospects, high workload and the work-life imbalance

60 % of the postdocs participated in several training modules or courses, especially regarding grant writing, learning (foreign) languages and project management. However, 40% did not yet participate in any training course at all. Nearly all respondents had supervisors, whom they see or speak to on a regular basis. Generally, they were quite satisfied with the guidance they received from their supervisor. Notably, nearly half of the postdocs did not feel encouraged by their supervisor to follow any personal training. Around 40% of the postdocs spent time during their postdoc position to further develop -additional- transferable skills in order to expand their eligibility for career options beyond research.

To measure the postdocs’ mental health, we used Goldberg’s (1972) General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12). This is a validated and widely used screening instrument to identify psychological distress and the risk of a common psychiatric disorder. The GHQ-12 maps the extent to which an individual has experienced certain symptoms more than usual in the past weeks. Experiencing four or more symptoms (GHQ4+) indicates the risk of a psychiatric disorder, especially depression. 39% of the 676 postdocs exhibited four or more symptoms (GHQ4+), which means they are at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Postdocs are increasingly present in and contributing to academia but are lacking visibility in the formal structural of their organisation as well as long-term career perspectives. This discrepancy results in reduced labour satisfaction and high levels of stress. They do receive some support from their organisation, as well as encouragement from their colleagues and supervisors. However, there are still several issues in need of resolution. Below we discuss a few solutions which could be adopted by the sector and universities.

- (1) Postdocs require more formalized visibility, which can be accomplished through their recognition as a separate staff category in UFO (“functie-orderingsysteem”).
- (2) It is important to raise awareness among various stakeholders concerning the complexity of the postdocs’ position, since they have to combine a variety of tasks and responsibilities with insecure career prospects. Maintaining this precarious balance causes considerable stress.
- (3) Universities should foster more support for postdocs by developing appropriate, focused, and pragmatic HR policies. Examples of instruments which could be realized include:
 - a. Launching a postdoc community or network, as for instance has been done by Ghent University, consequently improving the contacts among the postdocs more actively.
 - b. Providing career guidance by designing training modules for personal and professional development of postdocs, including mentorship programs. Encourage supervisors to discuss career preparation activities with their postdocs.
 - c. Establishing contacts with organizations that employ (former) postdocs or are interested in doing so in the future. This way, postdocs will be encouraged to reflect on their future prospects and career paths, either in academia or outside the university.
 - d. Diversifying and vitalising career paths of postdocs in co-creation with postdocs themselves.
- (4) The results of the mental health questionnaire are a call for action: universities need to take initiative to prevent mental health problems, increase wellbeing and to offer adequate help to postdocs who are already experiencing problems. Of importance is, among other steps, the training of supervisors to recognize mental health problems, to increase awareness of the importance of mental health, to build resilience and to decrease the stigma on mental health problems in academia.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank Carla Garcia Font for her assistance in the data collection. Wouter van de Klippe and Ingeborg Meijer from CWTS are thanked for their valuable comments and feedback.