Postdoc job applications: “don’t panic” guide!
Aim of this session

- An academic career has many pros and cons, but about 50% of CAS PhD students go on to postdoc positions

- Knowing how the system works will help you plan your applications (and career) effectively. This presentation will inform you about the typical application process

- Writing effective job applications is a new skill you need to learn. This presentation will provide key tips on how to improve your applications

- Note: some of these views are subject to my own bias, other faculty / postdocs will give valuable info too!
What are the types of postdoc positions?

- Typically a fixed-term 2-3 year research position

- Some are independent research positions (“fellowships”) offered by a university or institute

- Most are research associates tied to specific projects or investigators (although there is often freedom)

- Some are observatory or software positions (often with some fractional allocation for research)

- Can also apply for research council funding (e.g. ARC prize fellowships) but is very competitive

- Note: a “fellowship” is not necessarily better ...
What you should know (the basics)

• Applications are very time-consuming! (1 month’s work in total? Start preparing early!)

• Each position is very competitive, rejection is normal

• More opportunities to find a position if you are able to move (including internationally), is that what you want?

• Many jobs (75%) are advertised October-January

• Communication from employers to applicants during the process is usually very poor

• Easy to increase your chances by knowledge/preparation
How can I find available positions?

- Most jobs are advertized on the AAS job register (http://jobregister.aas.org)

- Circular e-mail lists (e.g., ASA, CAS)

- Your research networks and collaborators (ask them!)

- **Personal contact**, if you have a specific idea of where you would like to move

Which jobs should I apply for?

• Because of competition, apply for multiple positions (typically 10-20, sometimes as many as 50?)

• Don’t rule out things too quickly, since flexibility is often required and you cannot count on your “dream job”

• However, (obviously) don’t apply for jobs that you do not actually want

• Focus on positions for which you are a “good fit”

• Your life and personal goals are obviously very important. What are you prepared to compromise?
When should I apply?

• Many variations are possible, but typically in a job season you would:

• Apply for postdocs Oct-Jan (75% of jobs)

• Receive interviews/offers Jan-Mar

• Start new positions Sep-Nov

• Consider: where are you in your PhD, and when will you realistically finish?

• Consider: are you competitive for an application now?
What is a postdoc job application?

- Many jobs will specify what they want, but in general:
  - **Covering letter** (1 page) introducing yourself and explaining why you are a good fit for the position
  - **Research statement** (2-3 pages) describing your science plans and why you are the best person to do them
  - **CV** (2 pages) listing your education/skills/publications
  - List of potential referees
  - Sometimes a **response to selection criteria** (in Australia)
  - **Note**: get someone to proof-read for typos, etc.!
  - **General tone**: sell yourself (confident), but reasonable!
What happens in an application process?

- ~30 applications received for each job (10-100 ?)
- Reviewed by a committee of ~5 including the grant holder as well as non-experts in the field
- Initial review will be swift, producing a ranked shortlist
- This shortlist is interviewed and re-ranked
- An offer is made with an acceptance deadline
What does this process mean for you?

- Competition: you will need to apply for multiple positions, but also improve your chances (see next slide).

- You are addressing 2 audiences: expert and non-expert. Explain the significance of your work very clearly, but also provide some detail an expert will appreciate.

- You need to make the key points very clear to someone skimming your application in a few minutes. Repeat them in a couple of places!

- When on a shortlist, prepare carefully for an interview.
How do you improve your chances?

• Be a good fit to the position if possible (this can be in terms of skills as much as precise science topic)

• Write a good application (stating why you are a good fit)

• Tailor your application for each position

• Contact your prospective boss with sensible questions

• Use your network of existing collaborators and contacts, are any of them offering positions?

• Increase your profile by presenting at useful conferences

• Get papers submitted / on astro-ph before applications
Am I competitive for a particular job?

• Don’t be put off too easily, but do realistically consider your chances of success (“gumption and self-awareness”)

• For example: is this position a prize fellowship with 200 applicants? Is this position well outside my field with many better-matched applicants?

• Papers count - need to demonstrate a publication record for a research position - but are not everything

• Skills and fit to position are also very important

• Competition for U.S. postdoc positions can be tougher for students from 3-year vs. 6-year PhDs
Should I tailor each individual application?

- Yes, in a limited way
- Tailor one paragraph of your covering letter and some of the research statement
- Explain why you are good match to this specific job
- Explain why you are keen to join the organization
- Provide a science plan fitting to the position
- This helps the job committee rank you highly, as well as demonstrating to them that you have actually thought about these issues!
Covering letter

• A formal letter introducing your application

• Get the contact details right :-) 

• Paragraph 1: introduce yourself, your current position, and what position you are applying for

• Paragraph 2: briefly, what are your top skills / research achievements you would like the panel to know about

• Paragraph 3: why you want to move to this organization (specific details not just hollow platitudes), how yourself and your research would enhance their staff
• Short is good (2 pages, although can be longer if needed)

• Contact details at the top

• Short bullet point lists of academic record, research experience/skills, publications, awards/prizes, talks, conferences, teaching, outreach, roles/responsibilities

• Omit: personal info, photo, pre-university record

• Publication list: do not pad with “in preparation” papers. Highlight your name in long author lists, give web links

• Note: substantiate your claims with examples
Research statement

• This is a sales pitch not a research paper!

• You are presenting yourself as much as science. Why is the science compelling, and why are you the best person?

• Give clear summary of significance in first half a page

• Not too dense : include spaces, sub-headings, figures, bullet points, timelines

• Demonstrate you can carry out future science plans by describing your successful current research

• Has to impress both experts and non-experts, and need to tailor in some cases
How to choose referees?

- Most jobs typically ask you to nominate 3 references (either submit at time of application, or at shortlisting)
- Balance of **prominence** and **familiarity** with your research
- As well as supervisors, good to ask national or international collaborators not from the same institution as you, people with “name recognition”
- If you are in doubt, it is O.K. to have the conversation “are you able to write me a good reference for job X?”
- Give them plenty of time to prepare a reference! Also, fine to request referees to emphasize particular points
Key points about interviews

• Usually you will have a video interview with the panel using a set of fixed questions (talk not usually required)

• Preparation is key!

• Interview questions are 90% predictable (see next slide)

• Plan, and rehearse, answers to the questions in advance

• Use these answers to tell the panel why you are the best candidate for the position

• Give informative but concise answers, try not to waffle

• Ask sensible questions demonstrating your knowledge
List of predictable interview questions

- Why did you apply for this position? Why do you want to move to university X / country Y?
- Tell us about your PhD / biggest research achievement
- [If the position is tied to an existing project:] What skills and experience do you have in area X?
- [If there is some research freedom:] What independent science plans do you have for the position?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses as a researcher?
- Can you describe a situation where you had to deal with a difficult colleague / collaborator / situation?
- What are your career ambitions? (e.g. in next 5 years?)
If you get an offer!

- Typically an informal e-mail offer, contract follows later
- You are in a strong negotiating position
- It is fine to take some time deciding
- Perfectly fine to negotiate start date
- Ask the potential employer to clarify the science opportunities / research fraction in the position
- Clarify the financial side: salary and benefits? travel funding? funds for computers? relocation expenses?
- O.K. to discuss with existing postdocs in that group!
Concluding thoughts

- A postdoc can lead to a rewarding career path in academia or elsewhere, opportunities to travel etc.

- Postdoc job applications are daunting and time-consuming. Uncertainty about life and the future.

- It is not easy to write good applications or compelling research proposals. Do seek advice/feedback.

- Your current supervisors / mentors should be willing to give you frank feedback on your career plans - ask them!

- There are simple steps of preparation you can take to increase your chances of success