



Postdoctoral Fellowships in the Humanities

By Lindsay Cicero

A postdoctoral fellowship position refers to one offered to fresh graduates who have recently completed doctoral degrees. “Postdoc” fellowship jobs are not, strictly speaking, jobs as such. They borrow from typical job aspects, while at the same time embodying academic research duties. Postdoctoral fellows both research as well as perform well-defined job duties. It is therefore very difficult to classify its nature.



Postdoctoral fellows are typically given a specific monetary stipend to compensate them for their work. They are sometimes given job-related benefits such as health insurance, and can be paid salaries.

A postdoc is not an inherently long-lasting position. A postdoctoral fellow will not be offered a permanent faculty position at the institution at which he or she studies, although they will often be offered positions to work under more accomplished researchers. However, postdoctoral fellows need not work in academic institutions alone; they can also perform research for private companies. The difference here is that a private sector company typically predetermines what it desires from planned research; thus a postdoctoral fellow has to fine-tune his or her research to the company’s theorized or explicitly stated objective. The advantage of working for a private company is that one receives superior funding, while competition for research funds at academic institutions is fierce. Within the educational institution, one can also invite colleagues from various universities as well as collaborate with other academic institutions.

To pursue a postdoc in the humanities and social sciences was uncommon until recently. Institutions of higher learning did not have positions for postdoctoral fellows in these fields. They instead concentrated on “hard” science fields such as physics, chemistry and biology. These were very popular, to the extent that the humanities and social sciences were temporarily shunned.

Postdoctoral fellows in core science subjects are often better able to conduct high-profile research projects. The inherent

advantage they possess is that if they successfully complete their projects, they become more marketable as they will have proven their capabilities. This is why postdoctoral fellowship projects on core science subjects are more popular — an objective measure of success is possible, which will necessarily lead to academically sanctioned, and thereby public, recognition.

Currently, heavy competition exists in the postdoctoral job market due to an abundance of doctoral graduates. Most companies constantly restructure to eliminate non-critical functions in order to remain as competitive as possible. This means that postdoctoral fellows in hard science subjects, as well as in the humanities and social sciences, must compete for the few jobs available in their fields at any particular time. Unless companies are investing in extensive research, postdoctoral fellows are often unable to find work.

Doctoral degrees are the apex of academic knowledge. Institutions of higher learning bestow different types of doctoral degrees. The most common is a doctorate in philosophy. However, there are various other professional doctoral degree programs, including doctoral degrees in the arts, and a doctorate in legal matters, specifically called a Juris Doctorate, and more commonly referred to as a “JD.”

Doctoral programs typically take several years of dedicated effort. A specific research project is normally tailored by the student to his/her own preferences, within the parameters of a greater academic need, and under the direction of luminaries in the field. After extensive academic work in the program, the student will take both oral and written examinations — more grueling is the oral exam. In this instance, the doctoral student has to defend his body of research before a panel of professors. This exercise is meant to prove whether the candidate possesses the



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depth of knowledge of the subject under scrutiny, and how relevant is it to society in general, i.e., how significant the candidate's contribution will be.

Postdoctoral fellowships in the humanities and social sciences are not as regulated as some other professional postdocs, such as law and medicine. In these professional disciplines postdoctoral fellowship programs are regulated by state and federal laws. Postdoctoral fellows in the humanities and social sciences do not possess such stringent and specific regulations.

Much has changed in the current century in comparison to the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. In these prior centuries, governments fully funded most universities. However, this system of state patronage has been all but abolished. As a result, universities must devise ways of sourcing money to fund their higher academic programs. This has given rise to faculty entrepreneurship. Faculty members engage in consulting work as well as sit on executive (and well-compensating) advisory boards of companies. These engagements enable faculty members to maintain quality academic programs as well as motivate people to invest in more purely academic fields. One of the major drivers of these programs has been an increase in the percentage of the population that has higher levels of education than in the recent past.

A challenging and very lucrative avenue for postdoctoral fellows in the humanities and social sciences is faculty entrepreneurship. Beginning with engineering, it has since spread across various disciplines. Postdoctoral fellows can offer consultancy services as well as academic knowledge in practical circles such as work environment, as well as other avenues where people interact socially.

Government agencies recognize the need for society to constantly feed on new information. Governments have therefore invested heavily on research and development. Even though the private sector also undertakes research projects, these projects are specifically tailored towards ventures that will be profitable within an established time period. Postdoctoral fellows have society at-large at heart; those who would like to use their knowledge for the good of the general population can volunteer their efforts with relevant government agencies. The advantage of working for a government agency as a postdoctoral fellow is that one has leeway to tailor research to a uniquely academic area of interest. This is contrary to private-sector research, where the objective of the company has to be met before all other concerns.

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