

# Challenges facing the international postdoc

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*Tips for postdoctoral fellows and their mentors to make the training period go smoothly.*

International postdoctoral fellows and their mentors often are faced with distinct challenges, such as immigration status and language barriers. With almost half of the postdoc positions in the U.S. occupied by foreign nationals, it is becoming increasingly important to find solutions to these challenges. Teams at the **Children's Hospital of Philadelphia** and the **National Postdoctoral Association** have recognized some of these issues and have compiled informative modules to help overcome them. Some of their suggestions are summarized below.

## Recruiting international postdocs

The search for the brightest postdocs often can take mentors beyond their borders. However, this presents the mentor with a problem: How do you evaluate the experience of someone you've never met? The solution? Skype. Mentors can conduct interviews with interested candidates via video conference. CHOP also suggests utilizing a surrogate interviewer – a collaborator or colleague who lives or is travelling near the candidate. This will allow the mentor to have someone assess the applicant in person. Coupling these methods with traditional tactics like examining the candidate's publication record will give mentors a better sense of candidates.

## Immigration and visa status

Visa status is one of the most sensitive issues for international postdocs. The visa process is time consuming, expensive and confusing. Unfortunately, some mentors do not comprehend the weight of this issue. When PIs hire international postdocs, it is crucial for them to understand the process of getting and changing one's visa status. If the mentor doesn't appreciate the significance, then it needs to be emphasized by the trainee. Important deadlines and requirements should be communicated to ensure that the status of the trainee is never jeopardized during the length of the fellowship.

## Transitioning to life in the U.S.

Acclimating to a new country can be overwhelming for international postdocs. To ease this transition, institutions should provide assistance to incoming trainees. This can include housing suggestions and information on setting up bank accounts and utilities, getting a social security number, and transportation options. Clearly explaining the institution's payment system before the postdoc's arrival can ease his or her transition. Mentors also should help postdocs feel included by encouraging open communication and camaraderie within the lab.

## Dealing with communication barriers

While international postdocs may be fluent in English, some find it difficult to communicate and often resort to corresponding in their native languages. The inability to communicate well causes a strain, potentially hindering the mentor's capacity to train the postdoc. For the most beneficial postdoctoral experience, the postdoc should find ways of overcoming issues with communication. If oral communication is a problem, the postdoc can try communicating by writing or chalk talk. Taking

advantage of accent reduction courses also can improve the trainee's language skills. Another helpful hint for mentors is to organize meetings with postdocs during which they can voice their concerns. The meeting should be documented and followed up with an email to ensure that everyone is on the same page. Learning to communicate effectively will help postdocs become better overall scientists.

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### The case of a bad fit

PIs and their trainees invest time and effort to ensure that the postdoctoral training experience is productive. Unfortunately some relationships can turn volatile. Before things make a turn for the worse, the mentor and the postdoc need to make their expectations and dissatisfactions with the training experience clear. The interaction then needs to be handled with communication and consideration, because for an international postdoc, the situation presents a two-fold problem. The postdoc now needs to be concerned about searching for a position elsewhere and how this change may affect his or her visa status. Communicating early on will give both individuals time to plan and make necessary changes. Despite the issues that exist, handling the situation with tact will allow the transition to occur smoothly.

As research institutions become more culturally diverse, it is important that the scientific community also evolves to address the challenges that arise. Taking advantage of the resources from CHOP and the NPA will bring clarity to these issues and allow research environments to be cohesive and progressive.



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