



**UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

An Academic Career in the UK

For PhD students and Postdocs

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Dr A. Mesut Erzurumluođlu – Postdoctoral Research Associate

University of Cambridge (MRC Epidemiology Unit)

Important Note: The views shared here are solely mine. This document was written only to serve as general guidance for foreign PhD students and Postdocs in the UK. Please contact your supervisor or senior colleagues for specific problems. Please inform me if you spot any erroneous information. Many thanks in advance!

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“How did you get into Cambridge?”

I saw a tweet a while ago which said something along the lines of: “If you’ve been asked the same question three times, you need to write a blog post about it”. I get asked about how I got my current postdoc job at the University of Cambridge all the time. Therefore, I decided to write this document to provide a bit of a backstory as I did many things over the years which – with a bit of luck – contributed to this achievement. What’s a little bit surprising is that no one asked me this question when I used to work at the University of Leicester – where I was also a part of a top research group. I guess it shows the prestige of the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford 😊

Every time I get asked this question, I straight away translate it as “*how can I become a successful PhD student and work in top groups after my PhD?*”. Below I will try and provide concrete advice on how I improved myself but they will undoubtedly be shaped by my field of research – that is, Genetic Epidemiology – and my own experiences as a PhD student at the University of Bristol (School of Social and Community Medicine), and as Postdoc at the Universities of Leicester (Department of Health Sciences) and Cambridge (MRC Epidemiology Unit). For example, in our field learning a programming language is a must and therefore I will point to learning ‘R programming’ as an important criteria to be a successful early career scientist but this may not apply to a historian – who should probably learn a foreign language of interest rather than programming.

It will be a relatively long document but hopefully it will be worth reading in full for all **PhD students, postdocs** and **undergraduates** who want an introduction to the world of academia in the UK. I wish I could write it in other languages to make it as easy as I can for you, but I strived to use as less jargon as possible. I will also throw in some figures that I mostly put together (unless stated otherwise) to make the document less boring. I can only hope that there are no errors and every section is complete and fully understandable but please do contact me for clarifications, suggestions and/or criticism. I thank you in advance!

If I was to return to the main question of how I got into Cambridge as a postdoc – or more like how I found myself working in some of the top groups in the world, I can provide a very short answer:

- 1- I aimed for the top from the start
- 2- I always looked for ways to improve myself personally and academically and made sure my CV (and personal statement) reflected that
- 3- I sold myself very well in my personal statement and then in interviews
- 4- I was at the right place at the right time – that is, things that I can’t control aligned for me

I will try and offer guidance on the first three points as the fourth one is out of my hands. For example, you can’t control (i) the questions the interview panel will ask you, (ii) whether they will like your attitude or not, (iii) who else applied for the same job, (iv) whether they already have someone they like and you’re just there to make up the numbers, (v) whether their priorities align exactly with your skills – you may be ‘better’ than the other interviewees overall but they may have found someone who has a skill they really want, (vi) how the other interviewees sell themselves. The list can go on... But what I did realise throughout the years is that you can increase your chances from ~0% to up to 50% by doing certain things. I hope the below help you reach the places you want.

I must say it is important to realise that the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford are not the only top universities in the UK and there are world-class groups in almost all research-intensive universities in the UK. Things are a little different in the UK: I had many friends who rejected Oxbridge offers to stay at or go to another university as they thought this was the better option for them – and became very successful scientists.



King's College,
University of Cambridge

General advice to PhD students and new postdocs

In ten sections, I will share my experience on important issues such as how to become a successful PhD student, structure your CV/personal statement and prepare for interviews.

My general comments on doing a PhD

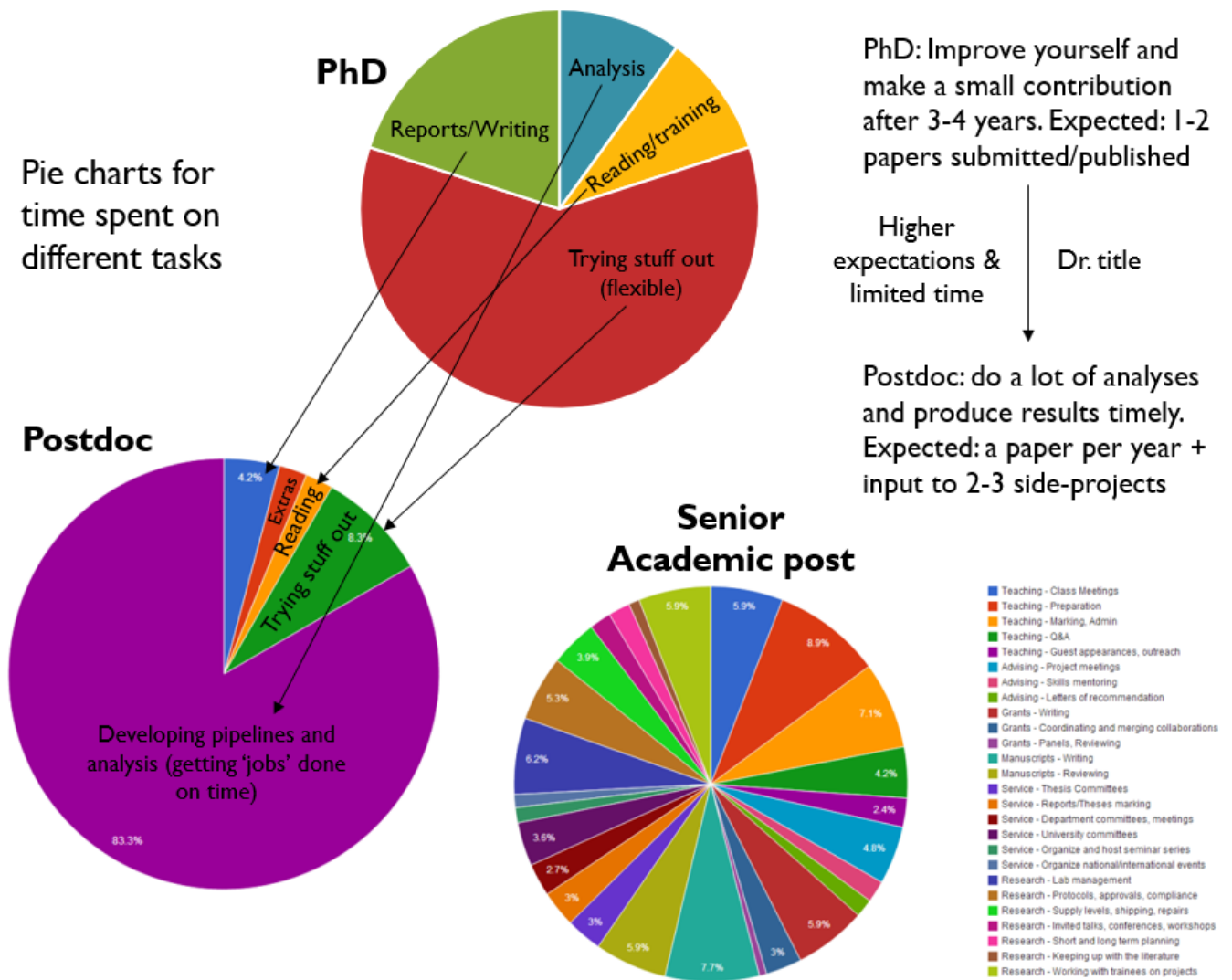
I submitted my PhD thesis on 30th October 2015 (Friday) at the University of Bristol and started my first postdoc job on the 2nd November (next Monday) at the University of Leicester. So, I already had a job lined up at a top research group although I hadn't technically finished my PhD – I still had a viva to pass and (thankfully!) minor corrections to make on my thesis. Hopefully you'll agree that I have done well as a PhD student and when I look back, I think I got the following things right:

- 1- My day-to-day (colloquial) English was very good, so I didn't have too much trouble learning technical terms. If your English isn't the best, I believe this should be the first thing you concentrate on. You will not regret **making time** to learning not just 'technical' concepts related to your research but also improving your colloquial English. I observed that PhD students who could speak English very well always found a way to complete their PhD – no matter whether their results were ground-breaking or not. To do this, I would advise reading a lot of books, magazines and newspapers but also listening to podcasts (e.g. LBC Radio app on Google Store is excellent) and radio. I started to learn English at 13 so I was in the same boat as most of you.
- 2- I took full advantage of **online courses** offered by sites such as Coursera, Stanford Langunita and FutureLearn, and excellent videos provided by YouTube channels such as Khan Academy, CrashCourse and 3Blue1Brown. I realised from day one that I had to learn more R or Python programming, UNIX commands, medical statistics, epidemiology and human genetics – which I learned mostly from courses hosted by these sites. My friends were also very helpful, but they were also PhD students like me and therefore were very busy – so I always tried to not disturb them for things I could learn off the internet.
- 3- I have **never doubted myself**. I have never belittled the hurdles I had to pass to get to where I am and always reminded myself that. I write this because many academics/researchers suffer from Impostor syndrome and it can become a very serious problem if it is not controlled.
- 4- I learned early on what was literally **expected of me as a PhD student**: an approx. 50 thousand word thesis with (i) at least 3 chapters that are 'publishable', (ii) an introduction

chapter where you display that you're on top of the past literature and (iii) a discussion chapter where you state the limitations of previous studies and your study, and your (potential) contributions to the literature in light of your results.

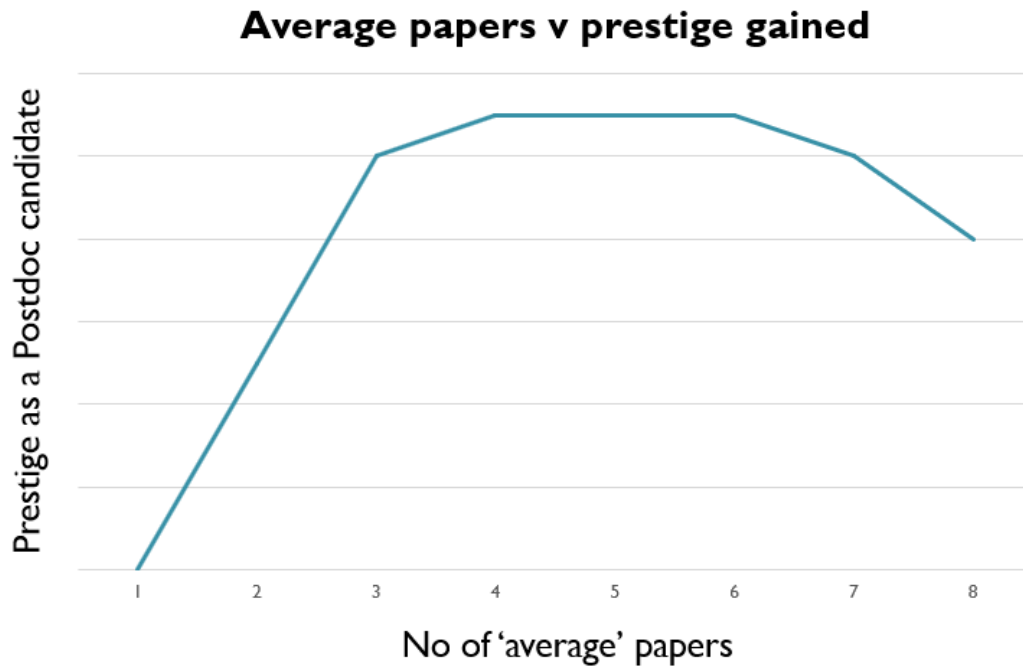
- 5- I read all the research article and review papers, blog posts, and even tweets that were relevant to my **specific research question**. If you think this is too much, I think you may not truly know what your specific **aims** and **objectives** (different things!) are. You should talk to your supervisors to clarify what these are.
- 6- I always made time for relevant and/or interesting seminars that were not directly related to my research. I made observations on how the good speakers structured their talks and slides, and where the bad ones made their mistakes.
 - a. For example, I saw that good speakers made eye contact with the audience and looked confident – even though they may have been nervous inside. When the speaker looks confident, the audience relax also – and they enjoy the talk more.
 - b. I always made sure the first few sentences in my presentations were well rehearsed. I knew if I made a good start, the whole talk would usually go well.
 - c. By listening to people from different fields I could see what the biggest problems in the world are and how people are looking to solve them. This also allowed me to see the **bigger picture** and where my research stands within this.
- 7- Before choosing my viva examiners, I read articles such as '*It's a PhD, not a Nobel prize: how experienced examiners assess research theses*' ([Link](#)) which changed my mind about the type of examiner I wanted to invite. I thought "*If I invite a young and inexperienced external examiner, I'll have an easier ride*" but after reading that experienced examiners will very likely have seen theses worse than yours and would have ultimately passed them, I decided that I was more likely to pass my viva if I went for an experienced examiner. Maybe he/she will give me a harder time in the viva but will pass me in the end. There is always some **wisdom to be picked up** that is only available to those who do their research properly. I always did some **background reading** before making a decision...
- 8- I really like the British proverb "**First impression is last impression!**" – and this applies to almost all walks of life in the UK. I always tried to make a good first impression by (i) smiling and trying to look confident before presentations and interviews, (ii) making sure my first few slides were always easy to read and aesthetically pleasing to look at, and (iii) making sure my first few sentences in a paper/essay/thesis were 'perfect' grammatically and content-wise by re-reading it more than latter sentences. I will keep referring to this maxim as I think it solved a big chunk of the problems I've faced.
- 9- I've always tried to keep a **close relationship with my supervisors**. This is a must as you're probably going to need their help, guidance and reference letters for most of your early career.
- 10- I've always made sure I had **dedicated time to** learn new skills and keeping up with the literature – even if it meant I took part in fewer 'side-projects' and ultimately had less publications than some of my friends who said 'yes' to everything. I see that many PhD students fall into this trap of working like 'cheap postdocs' for the sake of getting a few extra co-authorships under their belts. They accept to take part in any and every project to get their names in potential publications and lose focus on their own development and research. These students then struggle when they apply for jobs although their CV may look better than their competitors on paper, they will be found out in interviews. Even if they do get a job, they will struggle to find a 2nd postdoc job with the ever-increasing competition of the job market. You soon find out there are new postdocs who are as good as you although you have 3 years' postdoc experience because you don't have a solid foundation in say,

medical statistics, programming, genetics or epidemiology. I always made sure my 'pie chart of how I spend my time' resembled the 'PhD' one below and not the 'Postdoc' one.



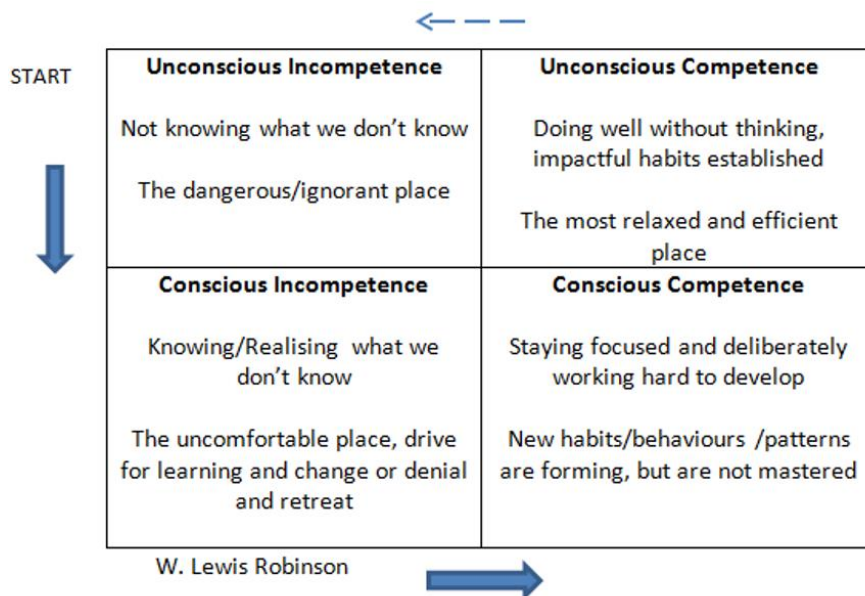
Source URL for bottom two (adapted) figures:
http://www.vandermeerlab.org/MvdM_SoYouWantToBeAnAcademic.pdf

11- I learned early on that publishing even just one **first-author paper in a respectable journal** made life much easier in your viva and subsequent job applications. If your results are not very impactful, it is still important to publish them in less prestigious journals as they will be concrete evidence that you can start and finish a project. But don't overdo it and publish five non-impactful papers as this will give the impression that you're happy to be an average/below-average scientist (see figure on the next page). You should always aim to squeeze in a 'high-impact' paper.



- Always aim for a high-impact paper!
 - If not lucky enough, then try publishing 1-2 'average' papers before finishing your PhD
 - Shows that you can write papers but also 'start-and-finish' a project (very important skill!)
 - But don't over-do it! It'll give the impression that you're an 'average' scientist and you're happy to be one

12- **Patience is key** to producing quality work. It's not easy at first but once you get into the habit of producing high quality work, it becomes second nature and you start to do the 'right things' without even realising. You become 'unconsciously competent' (see figure below).

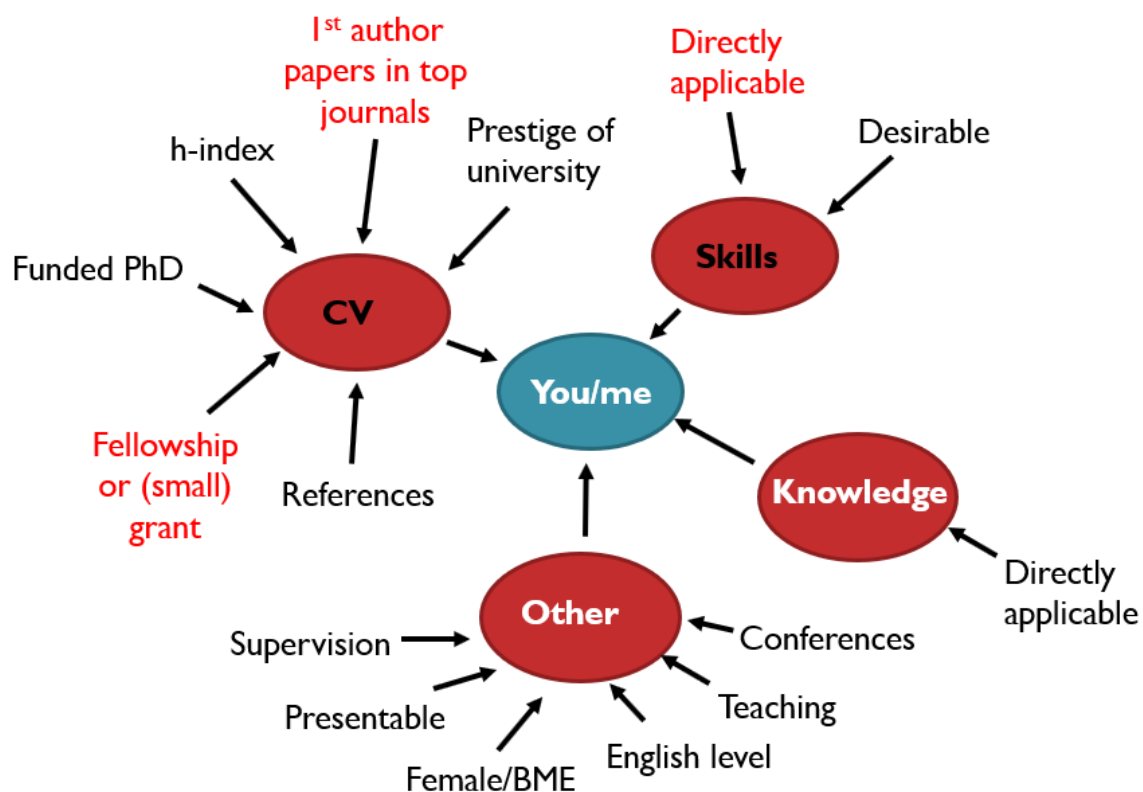


Successful people are usually 'unconsciously competent' in many aspects (e.g. time management, inter-personal skills, writing skills). To reach these levels, you must **want to improve yourself** in a certain aspect and move up the ladder from 'level 1' (unconsciously incompetent) to 'level 4' (unconsciously competent).

Post-PhD

- 13- I did research and decided on my potential post-PhD options almost a year before my submission date.
 - a. For example, I looked through the [Wellcome Trust Basic Science Career Tracker](#) (2013) ve [MRC Interactive career framework](#) and became more knowledgeable about the career options in the UK.
 - b. I have listed the websites I looked at to find postdoc jobs in the 'Post-PhD: An academic career in the UK' section below
- 14- I talked to not just my supervisors but also my senior friends to get their thoughts on what to do next
- 15- I also kept a close eye on the fellowship calls to see if any of the calls was aligned with my PhD research
 - a. I did make one grant application – and although it was ultimately not awarded – I did learn a lot from the process and saw how competitive it was.
 - b. Definitely worth looking: [Wellcome Trust fellowships](#) & [MRC fellowships](#)

*Your 'worth' as a early career researcher



*from funder/expert panel/PI's view

One of the biggest misconceptions of my friends is that they think they have no chance in the job market because they haven't published their papers yet. But getting a postdoc job is all about how you sell yourself, the skills you have accrued and the people you have met throughout the years. I have had many friends who easily found jobs at top groups although they had no papers at the time. If interested, please have a look at a blog post I wrote about your 'worth' as an academic:

Calculating the worth of an academic ([Link](#))

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Post-PhD: An academic career in the UK

Most graduates try to stay in academia but will not know all the different roles and options that are open to them. Increasingly in my field, graduates from top groups are moving to industry to work with Pharma companies – as they pay better than academic institutions.

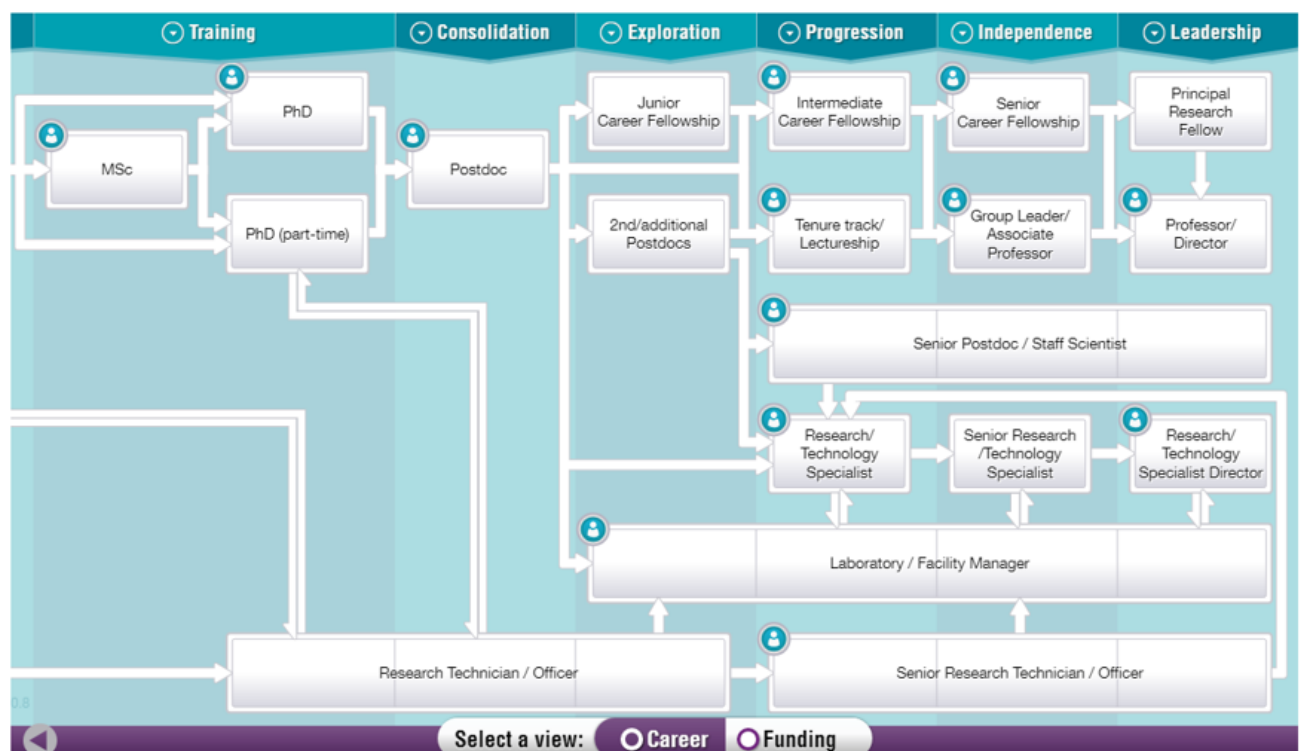
The below are the main four academic roles open to graduates in the UK:

- i) **Postdoc/Research Associate:** Working on a specific project led by a principal investigator (PI) – on a >£30k salary (fixed term)
- ii) **Lectureship (or Teaching fellow):** similar to an ‘Assistant professorship’ in other countries, where you would have teaching and/or research responsibilities – as well as some admin duties
- iii) **Fellowship:** Working on a specific project led by yourself – on a >£30k salary (fixed term)
- iv) **Research Assistant:** Cheaper version of ‘Research Associate’ posts (fixed term)

Explore career and funding options - Interactive career framework

The framework gives information on possible options for careers [📄] and funding [📄] in biomedical research within academia and/or industry.

Career view: the roles and routes displayed are illustrative and not exhaustive. **Funding view:** opportunities from eight funders are listed within the framework.



URL: <https://mrc.ukri.org/skills-careers/interactive-career-framework/>

Where should I look? Departmental emails, Twitter, Findapostdoc.com, jobs.ac.uk, conferences/talks

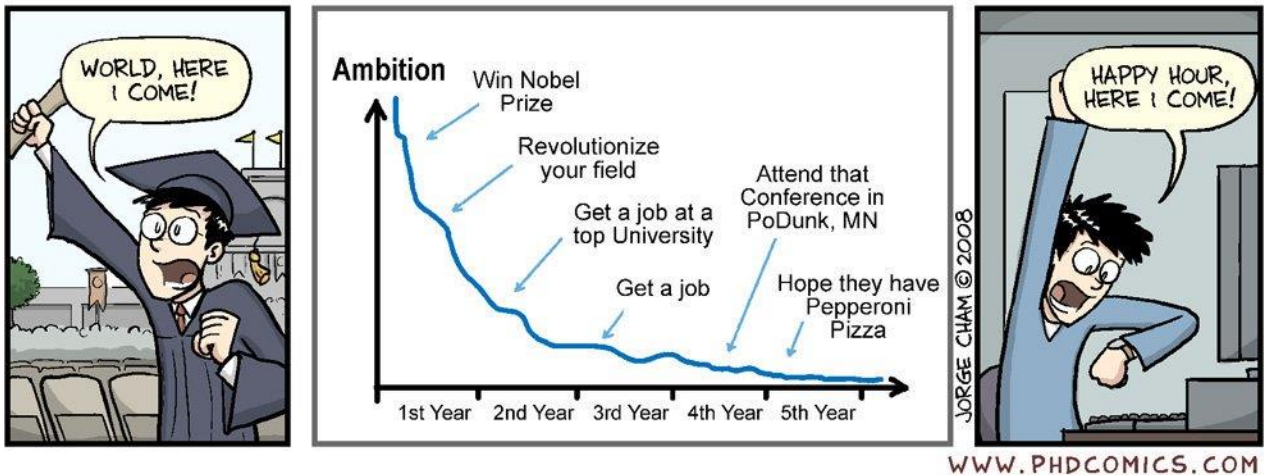
When should I look? At least 3 months before your thesis submission date

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Which jobs/projects should I apply for? (i) Firstly, projects that match your skillset but also will provide you with training opportunities, (ii) ≥ 2 year contract – a little bit of financial stability is very important, (iii) a good salary for the city you’re going to live in – my first salary of \sim £33k was good for Leicester but wouldn’t be for London, (iv) will you get a chance to publish first-author paper in top journals? – check the publications of the previous postdocs in the group, (v) how big the group is – you probably won’t be an important part of a group that’s already big, and (vi) the city itself – would you (with your family/partner) be happy to live there?

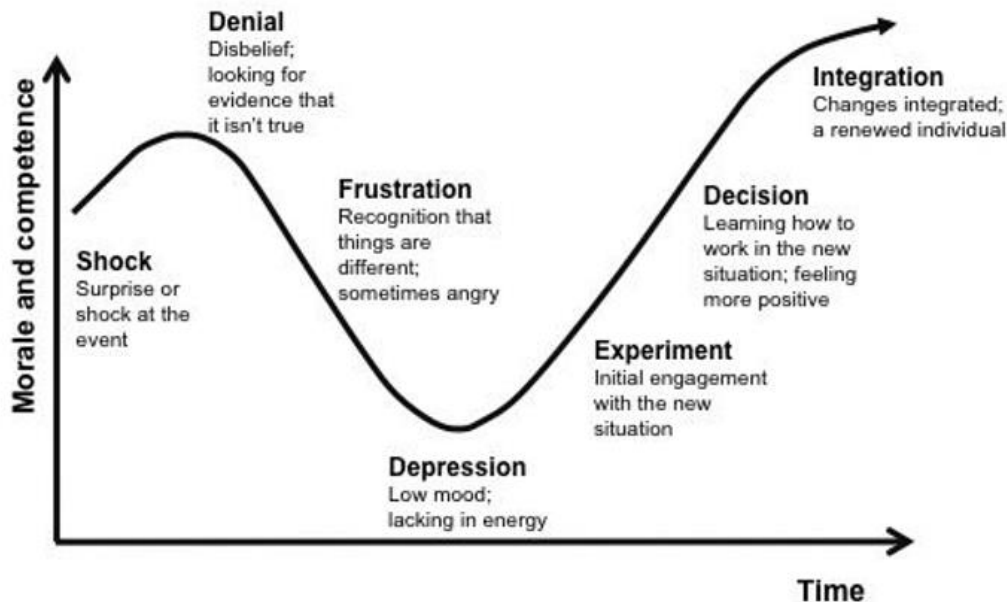
Apply to as many relevant jobs as possible and send your CV to as many PIs as possible – as not being unemployed should be the priority. If you do get several offers, great! Then you can accept the group and/or project you most like.

YOUR LIFE AMBITION - What Happened??



The stages we all go through (see figure above) 😊 We realise very quickly that academia isn’t what we expected it to be. It isn’t easy to keep going and things are getting even harder with the increasing competition. You should always take time out for your mental and physical wellbeing. Even watching a 5-minute YouTube video or looking at websites like Phdcomics.com can be useful – as, in a funny way, you get to see that other people are also going through the same anxieties that you’re going through.

The Kübler-Ross change curve



Kübler-Ross change curve: The figure you should remember every time you feel angry or disappointed with the way things have turned out. For example, you received bad reviews for a paper you submitted: instead of going “*Idiots! What do they know?!*”, you should put it to one side for a few days and get back to them when you’re feeling calm. This way you most probably will have the energy and focus to do the requested changes. You will also see that your manuscript has become much better than it was – even if all you did was a few tweaks. People who pass through the earlier stages of ‘shock’ and ‘denial’ quicker usually become very successful people – as many (many!) people get stuck in these stages.

Structuring your CV and ‘Personal statement’

To advance in academia it helps to publish papers and gain relevant technical skills, but you need to also learn to sell yourself better and keep trying. This is where spending some time structuring your CV and personal statement can help.

A CV could be summarised as a ‘list of your concrete outputs’ and a personal statement could be summarised as a ‘1-page cover letter’ that you use to underline the relevant skills you want your potential PI to see – showing that you’re the right person for that job/project. Everybody uses sentences like “*I am enthusiastic, hard-working and dedicated*” in their personal statements but if you can back it up with concrete examples on your CV, these minor looking improvements can give you the edge over your opponents.

My advice would be to:

- 1- An academic CV should list your publication and conference presentations before other sections. These are the most concrete evidences you have which prove that you have the technical skills you mentioned in your CV and that you can start and finish a project. You can find my (intermittently updated) CV in the link below:

cambridge.academia.edu/AMesutErzurumluoglu/CurriculumVitae

- 2- Your personal statement should be as short as possible (~1 page) and should only have sentences that you think (i) give a good impression of you as an individual, and (ii) are relevant to the post. I'm happy to share my personal statement to those working in my field but it consists of the following structure:

Paragraph 1: Explain why you've chosen this field/project. This way you can show why you're enthusiastic about the project rather than just stating that you're "*an enthusiastic person*".

Paragraphs 2-3: Talk about the skills you'd like to underline and why they're relevant

Paragraph 4: What sets you apart from others?

Example: "*I have wet-lab experience in addition to my in silico data analysis skills, which helped me become a better data scientist as I know exactly how the data I would be analysing was created in the lab and the things that could wrong.*"

Paragraph 5: Explain why you chose this group and project. It's important to praise the group and the project – and the PI if necessary.

- 3- Get your CV and personal statement checked by your PhD supervisor and/or your experienced colleagues. Add a sentence or two under each publication to summarise what it's about and your role – especially if it's a paper with many co-authors.
- 4- I like to spice up my CV by adding other non-academic things such as my work experience and then refer to them in a sentence in my personal statement and explain why they were important for my personal development as a scientist. See my CV for other potentially relevant sections.
- 5- I always thought sending a pre-application email to the corresponding PI was always a good way to gauge interest in yourself:

Dear Prof/Dr. *[INSERT SURNAME]*;

I am very interested in the post you are advertising, but I was wondering (i) whether there were any training opportunities and (ii) how collaborative the group is.

My CV and personal statement are attached.

Kind regards,

Mesut

[INSERT CONTACT DETAILS]

Relevant Skills

- Data analysis/management
 - Strong Python and R programming skills → 1
 - Experienced Bioinformatician → 2
 - UNIX/Shell scripts
 - Genotyping data
 - GWAS array
 - Deodorant-use GWAS (n=10k) → 1-4, 7
 - Population genetics/haplogroups – below
 - Exome-chip – rare coding variants (Erzurumluoglu et al, 2018)
 - Four smoking behaviour-related traits (n= up to 620k) → 1-7
 - NGS data
 - Whole-exome sequencing
 - Primary ciliary dyskinesia (Alsaadi & Erzurumluoglu et al, 2014) → 1-4
 - Papillon-Lefevre syndrome (Erzurumluoglu et al, 2015) → 1-4
- Population genetics
 - Haplotypes
 - Fine-mapping method: HAPRAP (Zheng et al, 2017) → 1-5, 7
 - Haplogroups
 - Interaction between Y-DNA haplogroups & Psychiatric disorders → 1-5, 7
 - Howe et al, 2017
 - Interaction between Y-DNA haplogroups & obesity-associated SNPs → 1-5, 7
 - Erzurumluoglu et al, 2018

I always make a list of the 'essential' and 'desirable' criteria and then structure my personal statement accordingly (paragraphs 2-4 above). I would also do the same thing before an interview using codes that they use (see figure above). For example, they may have listed 'Strong programming skills' as number one criteria so I would the number one next to my relevant skill which is R and Python programming.

Pre-, intra- & post-interview

Once you've done the right things in your CV and personal statement, hopefully you'll be invited to an interview where, needless to say, you need to prepare very well and show that you're not only the right person for the job but also that you can fit straight in.

My advice would be to:

- 1- Never forget that 'first impression is last impression!'
- 2- If they requested a PowerPoint presentation, make sure you know exactly how long it should be and adhere to it. Keep the introduction very short and concentrate on your relevant skills and achievements/outputs (e.g. published papers, awards).
- 3- Don't mention any weaknesses. They will most likely see it anyway but don't make their job easier. Especially don't mention any problems you had with your previous supervisors as they will most likely blow it out of proportion in their minds and think that you are a problematic character.

- 4- Be prepared! Read the group's latest papers. Make a list of things they're interested in and keep referring to them:

What they're looking for

Essential: Strong programming skills

Essential: Use bioinformatics tools

Essential: Solid statistical background

Essential: Genetic knowledge

Essential: Write papers/grants

Essential: Present results/attend conferences/Public engagement

Desirable: Epidemiology knowledge

Desirable: Supervise and teach

- 5- Prepare a couple of sentences to praise the group you want to join: *"I read your papers... and I want to be a part of these cutting-edge projects"; Importance of trait/disease they are focusing on; Potential impact of their projects (e.g. clinical trials); Training opportunities...*
- 6- **Genuinely** want the job and don't be in the *"I need a job!"* mode.
- 7- In the Q&A session make sure you listen to the questions carefully and repeat it back to them if you aren't 100% sure about what they asked. Don't jump straight into the answer and take your time before you say your first word. Try and give short and concise answers. They will ask for details if they are interested. There are always going to be lazy and vague questions such as *"where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?"*, *"how would you start an analysis?"*, and *"explain this term like you would to a person from the street"* and it's important you prepare for them and not waffle through them.

I remember answering *"Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?"* with:

"If I get the job, my main focus will be to do my best in the current job and publish papers of the highest quality. As time passes, I will be looking to apply for fellowships/grants and contribute to the group financially too."

- 8- Make sure your referees will provide you with a strong reference as any job offer you get will be conditional on a positive reference from your referees.
- 9- If you don't get the job, ask yourself *"what I could have done better?"* and just keep applying to other jobs. As I mentioned before, there are many things you couldn't control in the interview stage, especially who else was interviewed. Maybe it was a postdoc with 5 years' experience who got the job and you essentially didn't have much of a shot anyway. You making it to the interview stage may have been a great success in its own right – as you don't know who you beat to get there. See it as a good experience and move on. A close friend of mine told me that he made >100 applications before he got a job and he's now one of the most cited academics in his field – and a Senior Lecturer.

Writing a PhD thesis

There are many fantastic books, courses, blog posts and forums ([Quora](#) is brilliant!) on this matter and I don't have anything extra to add. However, it is worth noting that every university has their own regulations and templates. Make sure you read them properly before you start structuring your thesis. Also get your hands on a PhD thesis of a recently graduated student (don't plagiarise!). Your supervisors are likely very busy so make sure you read your chapters at least three times (and **loud** at least once) before sending it to them – and give them plenty of time.

Writing and publishing papers

Even if you're one of the most knowledgeable and skilful scientists in the world, if you haven't published anything, you'll very likely stay as a 'treasure waiting to be found'. As with the previous section, there are a tonne of fantastic documents out there on how to write good papers in different fields, therefore I will refer you to a few and move on to the next section.

EDITORIAL

Ten simple rules for structuring papers

Brett Mensh^{1,2}, **Konrad Kording**^{3,4*}

1 Optimize Science, Mill Valley, California, United States of America, **2** Janelia Research Campus, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Ashburn, Virginia, United States of America, **3** University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America, **4** Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, United States of America

* koerding@gmail.com

Rules 1-4

principles that apply to all parts of a paper (grants or posters)

Rules 5-8

apply to the main components of a paper

Rules 9-10

provide guidance on the process itself



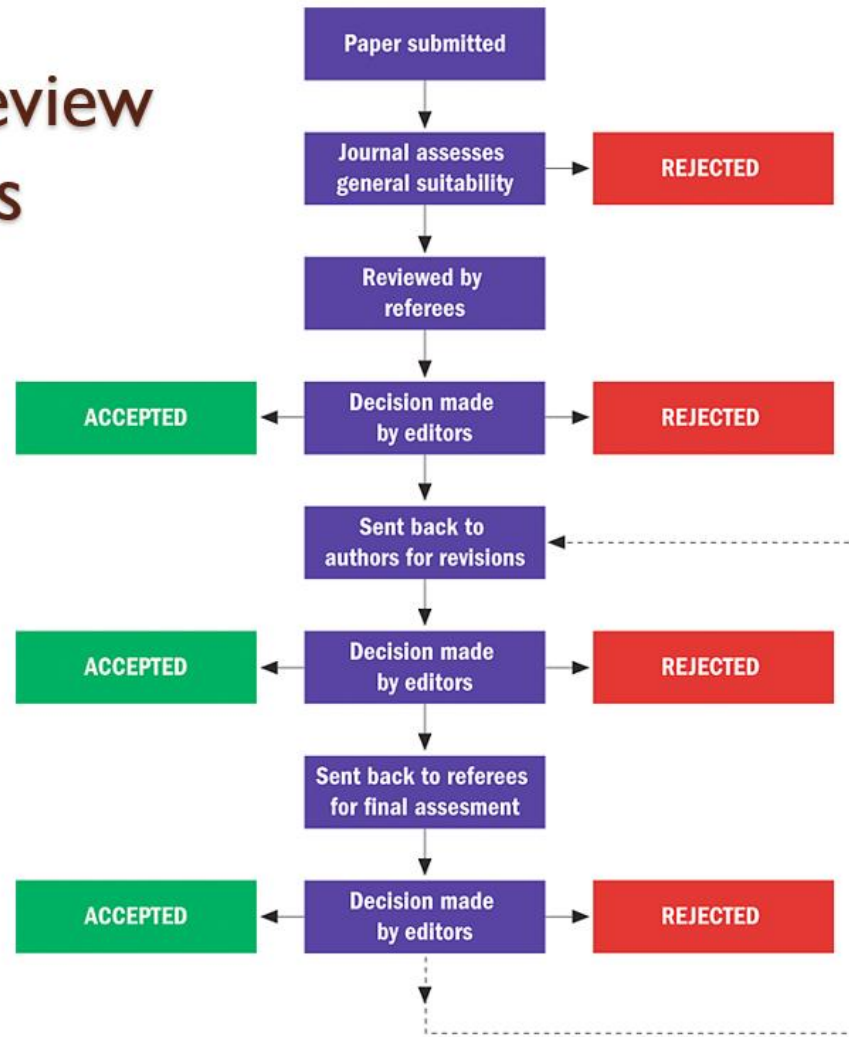
For PhD students in the Natural Sciences: Mensh & Kording, 2017 ([Link](#))

A blog post I'd recommend: Five common writing mistakes new scientists make ([Link](#))

Once you write the manuscript, it is important to do research on which journal to send it to. It is important that you do your own research before asking for your supervisor's recommendation. It is also important to accept that from submission to publication may take a year – so patience is key!

I really liked reading the following two documents: **Introductory guide for authors** ([Link](#)) ve **Introductory guide for reviewers** ([Link](#))

Peer-review process



The stages a manuscript has to pass before publication

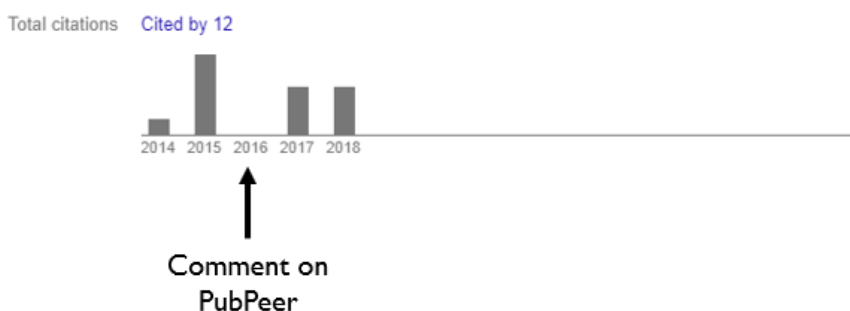
Once the manuscript is written and ready for submission, the following will help it reach the right audience:

- 1- Choosing the right journal is key – for example, (unfortunately) high-impact journals are always better than less known journals for exposure
- 2- Make sure you cite the right papers – this way those groups will more likely be aware of you
- 3- Present your paper in conferences
- 4- Make your paper 'Open access' once it's accepted
- 5- Share your paper on social media – Twitter, Academia.edu and ResearchGate especially – and add a little thread explaining the main points
- 6- If applicable, request that your co-authors also present the paper to their collaborators and departments
- 7- If there are preprint servers such as arXiv, BioRxiv or MedRxiv in your field, deposit your manuscript there for people to hear about your work before it's published (Note: make sure the journal accepts this)
- 8- Optional: You can comment on other relevant papers via PubPeer and Publons – making sure you add a link to your new publication

Unfortunately, lazy citing is a real thing in academia. Just to give an example: one of my papers was published a week later than another paper which reported the same results. However, their paper was published in a journal that had a higher impact factor. Our paper was continually being ignored by subsequent publications and I tried to bring it to the attention of academics in the field by commenting under that paper in PubPeer. I wrote something along the lines of “*we found exactly the same results independently - so replicated their findings*”. Our paper (see figure below) started getting citations although it didn’t get a single citation the previous year.

Nonsense mutation in coiled-coil domain containing 151 gene (CCDC151) causes Primary ciliary dyskinesia

Authors	Muslim M Alsaadi, A Mesut Erzurumluoglu, Santiago Rodriguez, Philip Al Guthrie, Tom R Gaunt, Hager Z Omar, Mohammad Mubarak, Khalid K Alharbi, Ammar C Al-Rikabi, Ian NM Day
Publication date	2014/12
Journal	Human Mutation
Volume	35
Issue	12
Pages	1446-1448
Publisher	Wiley
Description	Primary ciliary dyskinesia (PCD) is an autosomal-recessive disorder characterized by impaired ciliary function that leads to subsequent clinical phenotypes such as chronic sinopulmonary disease. PCD is also a genetically heterogeneous disorder with many single gene mutations leading to similar clinical phenotypes. Here, we present a novel PCD causal gene, coiled-coil domain containing 151 (<i>CCDC151</i>), which has been shown to be essential in motile cilia of many animals and other vertebrates but its effects in humans was not observed until currently. We observed a novel nonsense mutation in a homozygous state in the <i>CCDC151</i> gene (NM_145045.4:c.925G>T:p.[E309*]) in a clinically diagnosed PCD patient from a consanguineous family of Arabic ancestry. The variant was absent in 238 randomly selected individuals indicating that the variant is rare and likely not to be a founder mutation. Our finding also ...



Dealing with your supervisor

British culture is likely to be very different from your own culture – it is certainly different from Turkish culture. These differences can affect students negatively and I think it’s vital that you try and learn the British culture and not just the language. I always found British comedians such as Stewart Lee, Michael McIntyre, Ricky Gervais and Monty Python very helpful in this regard. If you can understand and laugh at their jokes, then you’re good to go 😊

Regarding relations with your supervisor(s), it is important to realise very quickly that they are very busy and may not have the urge to have meetings with you every week. Instead of criticising them for their lack of effort in supervising you, you should go to their office or book a slot in their calendar (if you can!) and make sure you have prepared well. I’ve had both types of supervisors before and had good relations with all of them. If they dish out criticism, don’t take it personally and try to learn

from them. Remember the Kübler-Ross change curve if it helps. As you become more experienced, you will learn to respond to your supervisor better.

An article I'd recommend: **Taking Control of Your PhD: The Relationship With Your Supervisor** ([Link](#))

Specific problems

- 1- Unless you must, don't work in the weekends. It's important that you recharge physically and mentally. I never worked in the weekends during my PhD.
- 2- Make sure you take part in some leisure activities with your colleagues within the week. It'll be important for your mental wellbeing but also to get to know your colleagues better

Time management

If you read the document until now and thought "*how am I supposed to do all these things?*", then you also need to add another thing to your list: reading articles on time management 😊 From my experience, the most successful academics I looked up to weren't necessarily Einsteins but they were incredibly good at managing their time and postdocs, and getting their priorities right. They also always had various events lined up (e.g. sports, 'away' days, travelling) to keep their motivation up.

Everyone is different, so must develop their own way of managing their academic life. For example, I would always work 8 hours a day – whether I had 5 hours' or 10 hours' work to do that day. I would introduce some variety to my day by reading interesting blog posts, enrolling to relevant online courses and writing my own blog posts – on top of my daily analyses. This way, I would always be motivated and not waste my time working inefficiently.

Summary

Tl;dr: I'm just going to reiterate some of the things I stated above because they are important:

- 1- Don't forget that you're a **PhD** student – not some random guy off the street. Act like it!
- 2- Don't turn into a cheap postdoc and make sure you take time out to improve yourself (Watch this TEDTalk: [Link](#)). You're not going to have much time to do this when you're an actual postdoc.
- 3- Focus on improving your 'transferable skills'. For example, in my field of 'Health data science' it is crucial to have a solid foundation in medical statistics, programming and writing good papers. These skills can be applied to any disease and dataset – and you will be sought after by many groups.
- 4- Take time out to philosophise about what you're trying to achieve and what you can do to improve yourself and separate yourself from others
- 5- First impression is last impression! Make sure people have a positive impression of you when they see the first page of your CV or when they Google you and find your picture.
- 6- Meet PhD students in other departments and find out how you can be of help to them. My most cited paper was with a close friend who was working on totally different projects. But one day when we were bouncing ideas off each other, he and I came up with an interesting idea and wrote a paper. Our supervisors liked it so much that it was submitted relatively quickly, and the paper received over 300 citations in its first two years. My friend and I were first and second authors on the paper, respectively.
- 7- Learn from other students' mistakes so that you do not repeat them
- 8- Don't waste too much time on side-projects that are in the 'idea' phase. It'll very likely be discarded after a while or that it'll take a very long time before anything concrete comes out of it.
- 9- Don't forget that **you're the most important** component of a PhD. If you're good, you'll pass. When you're a postdoc, the project becomes the most important thing. Therefore, take as much time as you can to improve yourself during your PhD.
- 10- Find ways to motivate yourself. It is an extreme example, but a very clever friend of mine had lost his motivation because "*there wasn't anything left to do/learn*". I remember telling him, I go to the library every now and then to see with my own eyes how much there is still to learn. Visiting a (large) library is a very humbling experience and ignites my thirst to learn.

About me

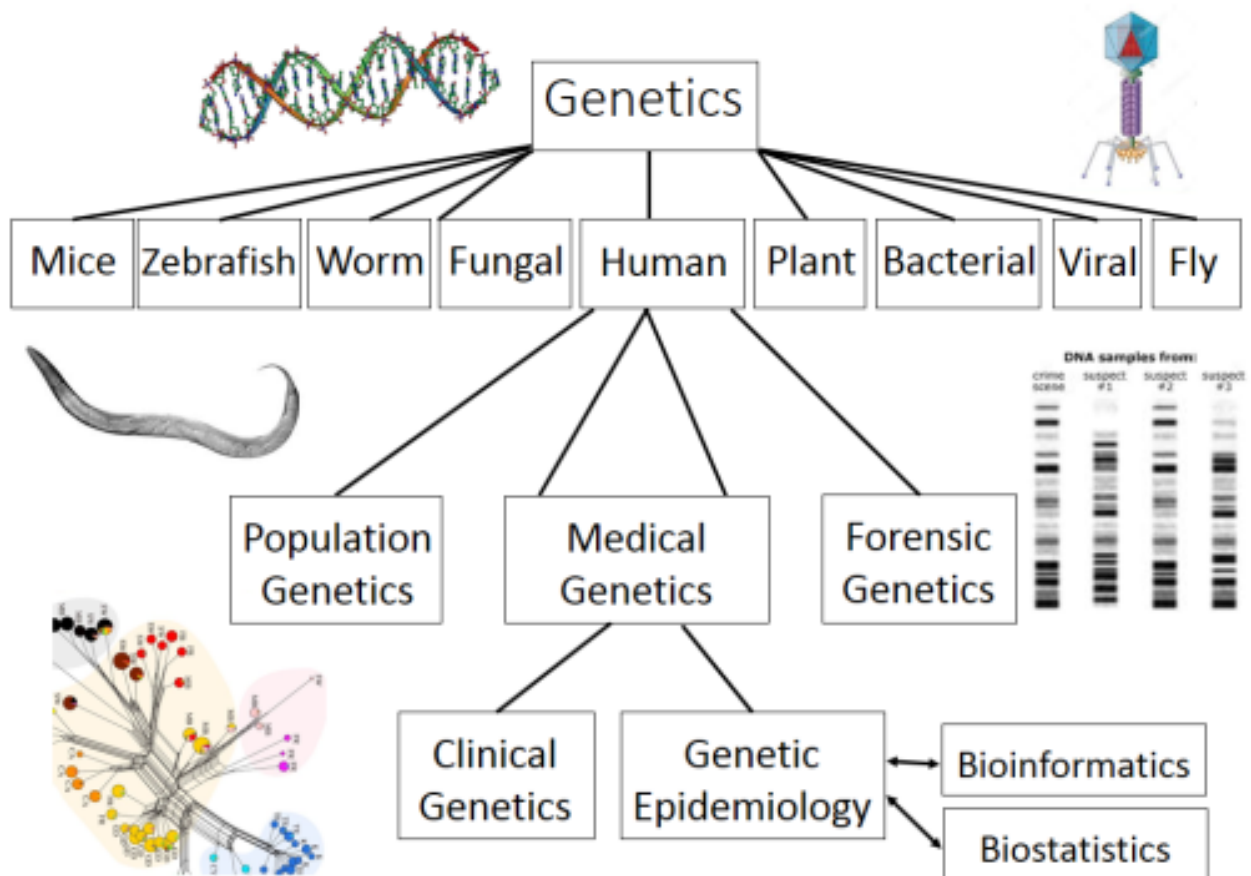
I'm currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Genetic Epidemiology (see figure below) at the **University of Cambridge** (MRC Epidemiology Unit). As a group (lead: Dr Claudia Langenberg), we mainly study the genetic aetiology of common metabolic disorders such as Type-2 diabetes and Obesity.

Before this, I worked as a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Genetic Epidemiology at the **University of Leicester**, under Professors Martin Tobin and Louise Wain. As a group, we were mainly interested in the genetic aetiology of common respiratory diseases (e.g. chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma) and related traits (e.g. lung function, smoking behaviour, blood pressure). I led a genetic association study of smoking behaviour-related traits and an interaction study between lung function-associated variants and air pollution.

Previously, I did a PhD in Genetic Epidemiology at the **University of Bristol** (with a full 4-year scholarship from the MRC; supervised by Dr Santi Rodriguez and Prof Tom Gaunt) where I mainly analysed whole-exome sequencing data obtained from consanguineous individual/families, and tried to identify (novel) causal variants of rare human diseases (e.g. Primary ciliary dyskinesia, Papillon-Lefevre syndrome).

I obtained a BSc in 'Biological Sciences (Genetics)' in 2011 from the **University of Leicester**.

I also took part in many Population genetics and other common disease genetics projects. I would be happy to have discussions/collaborations in clinical/medical genetics, genetic epidemiology, consanguinity and related areas (e.g. population genetics, epigenetics) with anyone.



Where 'Genetic Epidemiology' roughly stands within the large field of 'Genetics' (For details: [Link](#))

Contact details

Happy to help with any questions you may have:

Blog: mesuturkey.wordpress.com

Twitter: [@mesuturkiye](https://twitter.com/mesuturkiye)

Email: m.erez@hotmail.com

Kind request

If you thought this document was useful to you in any way, please consider donating and/or registering to Anthony Nolan (www.anthonynolan.org) – a charity trying to help blood cancer patients.