

ASA ECR Mentoring workshop

Summary of Friday panel discussion

The panel included: Brian Boyle (CSIRO), Kate Brooks (CSIRO, ASA), Matthew Colless (AAO), Warrick Couch (Swinburne), Bryan Gaensler (CAASTRO), Karl Glazebrook (Swinburne), Geraint Lewis (University of Sydney), Sarah Maddison (Swinburne), Rachel Webster (Melbourne University).

The topics discussed were the 2-body problem and job offer negotiations. In the end, members of the panels were each asked to give one single advice to the audience.

1. 2-body problem

The problem

The 2-body problem can be a serious problem or at least a major complication for academics. When asked more than 2/3 of the audience (mostly young postdocs) have experienced the 2-body problem. It was noted (Karl) that the 2-body problem can be weak (astronomer + non-astronomer) or strong (astronomer + astronomer). Also, the problem can have a wider impact on the family, including grandparents and children (Bryan/Kate).

Things to consider

The 2-body problem can be solved (even the strong one) one needs however to consider the bigger picture. First, don't think it terms of a 'problem', think about it as an opportunity (Bryan/Darren). Second, you never know how the decision you didn't make would have turned out so don't worry about it! (Kate). Finally, your partner is always more important (Matthew). Be prepared to sacrifice your career for your partner, don't write off the option of retraining yourself.

Tips

Going somewhere familiar/with established family makes things easier (Darren), for example your partner may have better opportunities to get a job. However, don't expect to have a job lined up for your partner before starting (Bryan).

When taking a new position the institute may help with the relocation expenses, or with flexibility with start date.

Sometimes you may wait for a job opportunity. However, taking time out can handicap you in the battle for jobs (Geraint), but people are becoming a lot more understanding of this, so in such a case remember to explain your situation in the CV or motivation letters (Warrick/Sarah).

Also, keep in mind that there are many opportunities for short term (~6 months) contracts as left-over bits from grants (Karl), so you may stay involved even without a full-time position - soft money (Darren).

If getting a job in the same place as your partner is not possible then try to arrange multi-institution appointments/visiting position. Academia is pretty flexible - talk to your manager, solutions can be worked out (Warrick). In such cases your professional network can be of great help (Brian). In case of the strong 2-body problem keep in mind that joint positions do happen but are very rare.

Children part-time working arrangements are becoming common and are relatively easy to arrange but come at the cost of your salary (Matthew).

2. Job offer negotiation

Before negotiation:

After you get a job offer and before you sign the contract you have a lot of power, as soon as you sign your power is gone (Darren). So don't waste this opportunity. Job offer negotiations are not only for permanent faculty jobs, even postdocs can negotiate (Warrick). First, go and talk to your mentors about reasonable things to ask for in terms of salary, start-up funds etc. (Geraint). Talk to your new colleagues - it is in their interest to have you succeed (Karl). What you can negotiate depend on a country.

In the USA you may get even \$500k-start up package (for the period of the first three years) to pay for your office, computers, students (Karl). However, you always need a research plan to justify your expenses. In Australia there is less freedom, as there are transparent regulations, so depending on pulling power you may get \$20-50k (Brian). This may not be as bad as it looks, since there are no overheads in Australia, and students come for free. Before you start negotiating write down a list of the essential and the frivolous. If you can make a case for it that will help. Also "choose the things that can advance your career rather than just money today" (Matthew).

During negotiation

Keep in mind that the person you're negotiating with has done this a lot more than you have, "I want them to ask me for the thing I would have given them anyway - then I can give it to them and look like a good guy" (Matthew). It might be easier for you personally to do this by email rather than in person (Kate). Learn about the salary classification system/scale – and try to use their language when negotiating (Sarah). During the process you don't need to say anything about other jobs/offers/applications (Kate).

Negotiate almost anything that is job related: relocation, travel money, student funding, parking spot, transferring postdocs/students, health cover, pension, school fees, flexible working hours, visa reimbursement, honeymoon periods from teaching/admin, probation period (Bryan/Geraint/Kate). Most likely you will not get everything, be prepare to give up on some of these points (Bryan). Remember, "as long as you do it in a civil, professional, rational way you can only gain respect" (Matthew).

After

Get things in writing - verbal 'contracts' or emails mean nothing (Bryan). It is unlikely to renegotiate the contract afterwards. However, if you get another job offer go to the head, and talk, you may be surprised how much you can get if the institute wants to keep you.

3. Advice from the panel

Matthew: "Find a really good mentor. Listen to them. Copy them"

Geraint: "Network. Network. Network"

Kate: "Collaborations. People who know your work outside your institution."

Bryan: When you get your first permanent job - stop, think what you want and plan for the long term. Take the opportunity to learn something new

Matthew: Take time to be a postdoc. Don't settle down too soon.

Bryan: " Have fun. If you're not having fun it's not worth doing"

Sarah: "On your journey your destination changes" Re-evaluate your goals at different stages

Darren: "Be daring" You have lots of freedom, take a chance