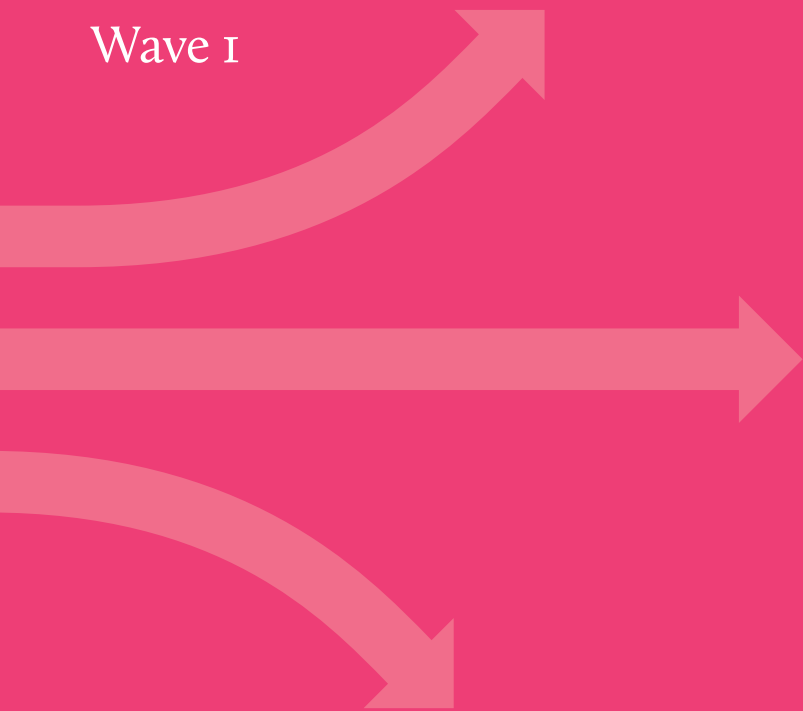


Career Tracker 2009

Wave 1



Wellcome Trust Career Tracker: Results of wave 1 (2009)

Introduction and background

As part of our efforts to strengthen our evaluation activity, we have developed a prospective approach to career tracking. In 2009 we launched the Wellcome Trust Career Tracker – an online survey tool that enables us to track the career destinations of key cohorts of Wellcome-funded researchers over time.

One of our key aims is to provide training and funding support for research leaders of today and of the future; the Career Tracker will also provide valuable information on the extent to which this aim is being achieved. In addition, we will be able to draw on the analysis to support annual reporting against our organisational objectives.

This longitudinal approach will provide us with key information on the career outcomes of our awardees and enable analysis of the relative career impacts associated with different modes of funding.

This summary gives findings from the first wave of the Wellcome Trust Career Tracker.

Methodology

An online survey was designed to collect career data from awardees. The survey will be sent on an annual basis to designated cohorts of individuals in receipt of our funding. Awardees are grouped into cohorts based on the year the award was made and the type of award received. Each year, new cohorts will be added as their awards come to completion, while former awardees will be asked to update their career status.

In this first wave of the survey, awardees of several key Trust award schemes in the final year of their award or recently finished were invited to complete this survey. Awardees of the following schemes were included in wave 1 of the survey:

- basic science PhD studentship (PhD)
- Research Career Development Fellowship (RCDF)
- International Senior Research Fellowship (ISRF).

The PhD studentships and the RCDFs were awarded to researchers at UK institutions, while ISRF awardees were based at academic institutions abroad, mainly in eastern Europe and India.

Overall participation in the Career Tracker was high, with a total response of 79 per cent. In subsequent waves we aim to maintain a high response across all cohorts, working to secure continued participation by engaging with participants.

All analysis reported is based on those in the cohorts who responded to the survey – unless otherwise stated.

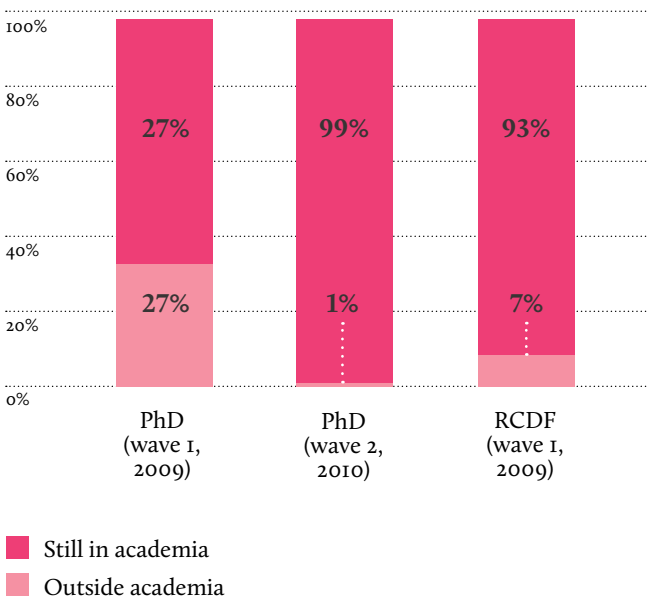
Summarised responses of awardees by funding scheme

Scheme	Cohorts included (year award was granted)	Total cohort	Responded to the survey	% response
Basic science PhD studentship	2004–05	132	98	74
Research Career Development Fellowship (RCDF)	2000–2005	129	108	84
International Senior Research Fellowship (ISRF)	2000, 2002–03	45	36	80

Key findings

The majority of the participants in the study had completed their Trust awards and were now working in academic research. The more senior awardees – former RCDFs and ISRFs – were particularly well established in their academic careers (99 per cent and 93 per cent respectively), while 73 per cent of former PhDs were also in academic research.

Awardees still in academia



Base: All who have finished their award – PhDs 2004–05: 44; RCDFs 2000–05: 94; ISRFs 2000, 2002–03: 29.

PhD award holders: destinations post-award

Academia was the first employment destination for three-quarters (73 per cent, n=32) of PhD awardees who had completed their award, the majority in postdoctoral research assistant posts.

In the cohorts under investigation, while more than half of PhD awardees were women (59 per cent, n=58), the proportion of women remaining in academia after their award had finished was much lower than among men: 63 per cent (n=19) of female PhDs and 93 per cent (n=13) of males remained in academia.

The majority of PhD awardees still in academia had remained in the UK (84 per cent). Five former awardees had left the country, four to pursue academic careers in the USA. Three-quarters (78 per cent, n=21) of those still in the UK and taking a first position in academia were employed in the same institution where they had held their award.

RCDF award holders: destinations post-award

Following the completion of their awards, all except one RCDF awardee were employed in academia (99 per cent, n=93). Almost three-quarters of recipients of RCDFs in the cohorts included in the Career Tracker were men (73 per cent, n=79).

RCDFs enjoyed a high level of independence as researchers, and most were in receipt of continued funding. Two-fifths of RCDFs who had finished their awards were funded by the Wellcome Trust (41 per cent, n=38) and another 43 per cent (n=40) were funded by the UK Research Councils.

More than half of RCDFs (56 per cent, n=53) were employed as Senior Researchers or above and the majority were still based in the UK (87 per cent, n=81). Three-quarters (74 per cent, n=60) of those still in the UK had stayed at the institutions where they had received their award.

ISRF award holders: destinations post-award

All except two ISRF award holders were employed in academia following the completion of their award (93 per cent, n=27).

In line with a key aim of the ISRF scheme, all former awardees remained in the country of their award and most (89 per cent, n=24) had received further funding from institutions in the countries where they were based.

The majority of respondents plan to continue in their chosen career for the foreseeable future.

Outside academia

In total, 15 respondents who had finished their Wellcome awards had left academic research: 12 former PhD students (27 per cent of PhDs), two ISRFs (7 per cent of ISRFs) and one RCDF (1 per cent). Most were still working in science-related areas such as in the pharmaceutical/biotech industry, medicine, science policy or science communications.

The reasons given for leaving academia included: “a dislike of academia”, “a lack of job security and funding” and “a desire to try a different work experience”.

As previously mentioned, women were more likely to leave academia than men, with 12 out of the 15 who had left being women (11 PhDs and one RCDF were female).

Attitudes towards an academic career

Across all three award types (PhD, RCDF, ISRF) respondents described their main motivations for pursuing a career in academic research in terms of their “passion for research”, the “intellectual challenge” and the “independence” and “flexibility” of academic life.

Most would recommend a career in science to others, but many noted that it was a tough if rewarding career choice requiring determination:

- Unless there is 100 per cent commitment and dedication and some talent for scientific research, this career can be very frustrating and lead nowhere. (RCDF)
- I really enjoy the science. The iterative process of phrasing a hypothesis, testing it and rephrasing it; the sense of exploration; the varied people you meet in a scientific community. It's a little bit like being paid to play, and that's brilliant. (PhD)

- In common with other career-based studies, the Career Tracker participants described the main barriers to the pursuit of a career in science to be the “difficulty in obtaining funding” and the “lack of job security and career structure”.
- There is not sufficient funding in the UK to support researchers who wish to progress from the postdoctoral level to a higher academic post and set up a research group. (RCDF)

Having decided that I would like to pursue the line of research I have been engaged in for a number of years now I am facing the usual challenges of the postdoctoral existence of short-term fixed contracts and high pressure to publish/secure funding to enable continuity in my work. (PhD)

Next steps

As participants will be tracked annually, and new cohorts added to the study, we intend to follow former awardees’ careers and provide updates on progress and challenges faced, particularly those pursuing a career in scientific research. In addition, we intend to explore a range of other pertinent issues, including:

- views around career structures in science and how to address the challenges
- demographic patterns and differences in career plans and outcomes
- mobility among the different cohorts and award schemes
- potential impacts of the recession and changes in patterns of funding of research.

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