

FELLOWSHIPS ADVICE

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CAREER HISTORY

- BA / MSci (physics): Cambridge
- PhD (astrophysics): Princeton
- First postdoc: U. Chicago
- Second postdoc: Cambridge
- First academic position: UCL

FELLOWSHIP HISTORY

- Fellowship=applicant's "excellence"+research proposal
- 2004-2007: Hubble Postdoctoral Fellowship (US/NASA fellowship in astronomy)
 - ▶ Had several offers of US University named "prize" fellowships
- STFC Advanced Fellowship + Halliday Prize (2007)
- EU FP7 Marie Curie International Reintegration Fellowship (2007)
- Leverhulme Trust Philip Leverhulme Prize (2009)
- ERC Starting Grant (2013)

WHY/WHEN STFC AF? (PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE)

- WHY?

- ▶ I wanted to come back to the UK.
- ▶ Long term prospects for a permanent position improve greatly for AF holders.
- ▶ Internationally recognized measure of achievement.
- ▶ Mentor/contact at Cambridge offered encouragement to apply.

- WHEN?

- ▶ Holding US national fellowship + several influential post-PhD publications = demonstration of independence.

STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP INDEPENDENCE

- Try to get a fellowship targeted for people just finishing PhDs or junior postdocs (RAS fellowship, JRFs, numerous fellowships abroad) before applying for AF or RS URF.
- Fellowships allow you to work independently on your own ideas, and come with travel+research budget.

STRATEGIES TO DEMONSTRATE INDEPENDENCE I

- Broaden your research beyond your PhD research.
- Don't keep working only with your PhD advisor - broaden your collaborator network.
- While you may have many ideas and projects from your PhD to continue in your first postdoc, don't let this stop you from developing new collaborations with people at your postdoc institute. Be proactive.
- Initiate projects with students. Learn how to supervise the research of junior colleagues.

STRATEGIES TO DEMONSTRATE INDEPENDENCE II

- (If your current position allows you to do so) work on projects initiated by you with your own ideas, and work with your peers in collaboration, not only with very senior people.
- At the same time, it's wise to keep well-regarded senior colleagues acquainted with your research! (you will eventually need excellent reference letters...)

STRATEGIES TO DEMONSTRATE INDEPENDENCE III

- Don't rely on your publications to get noticed all by themselves. Travel, give talks, go to conferences and tell people about your work.
- My impression is that you have to have "name recognition" in your chosen speciality to get a senior fellowship.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION

- Follow the instructions! (contents, page lengths, formatting, colour, sides etc etc)
- Number the pages and put your name in the header (when your application is dropped on the floor, it can be put back in order!)

LETTERS OF REFERENCE

- Follow up with referees whether they sent in the letters well before the deadline!
- Provide them useful information to make their letter the best it can be.
- Referee selection (The best letters describe and assess the person and his/her work in some detail, and directly compare the candidate with well-known persons at a similar career stage)
- Ideally, a letter describes the applicant's suitability for the specific fellowship (rather than a generic mass-produced letter)

PREVIOUS ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Try to identify your role in, or specific contribution to, the achievements described in your application. This is particularly important for, e.g., papers where you are not listed as first author.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL I

- Difficult to state what makes a proposal successful but you “know it when you see it”: solicit and read past successful proposals from colleagues.
- Demonstrate your skill in selecting an important research project, and your ability to explain it within the allowed page limits.
- The project should be one of obvious relevance and impact, but also needs to be one that is not so ambitious that it is unlikely to be accomplished in XX years.
- Generally one or two specific projects are better than a "grab-bag" of smaller individual efforts. Tailor to specific fellowship rather than sending a generic application.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL II

- Proposal writing is time-consuming and can seem like a stressful and horrible chore when you could be doing useful research.
- Treat it instead like a liberating time of taking stock of your past research, and brain-storming good ideas for the future. Get excited about planning what you want to do - it will shine through in your writing.
- Show to a trusted mentor and get detailed criticisms. Write and rewrite till every word in your proposal belongs there. **THIS TAKES TIME!**
- Finally, get criticisms from your Institution sponsor / contact and put finishing touches on your proposal.

INTERVIEW TIPS

- Research the panel. Some will be non-specialists in your area. There will usually be at least one expert.
- Find the balance in your talk to appeal to both groups. Enthuse the non-specialists while convincing the specialists that your work is serious and important.
- Timing is critical in an AF interview - they will cut you off after the stated time.
- Request a mock interview with your host Institution. At the very least, show your slides to your Institution sponsor, and get their comments.

THE NEXT STAGE

ACADEMIC POSITION

- Several institutions contacted me as soon as I got an AF, asking me to transfer it there and begin a lectureship following the AF.
- AF / RS URF holders almost always find an academic position before the end of their fellowship.
- CAVEAT - fellowships are usually decided on merit. Academic positions are often decided both on merit and the importance a specific department attaches to developing a given research sub-field. You won't get a job in a given department just because you hold a fellowship.