

# VMSG Early Career Fellowship Writing Workshop

**10:00-10:50** Part 1 + panel discussion

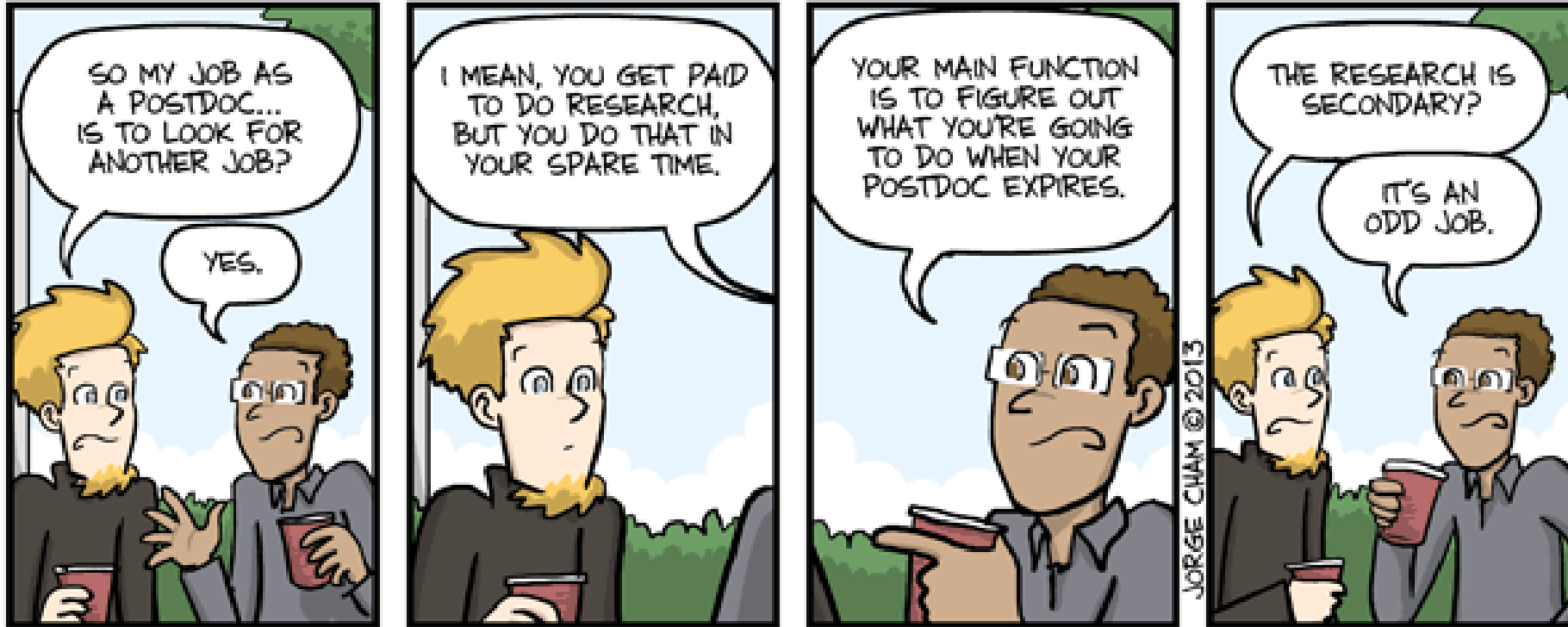
**10:50-11:10** Coffee break + informal chatting

**11:10-12:00** Part 2 + panel discussion



Credit: Ailsa Naismith

- The end of a PhD can be overwhelming!
- This workshop is responding to ECR forums at previous VMSGs
- We hope to demystify the postdoc process
- Full intro to panel members later!



## Where to look?

- VMSG mailing list
- Volcano list serv
- EGU jobs board
- Earthworks

- A good way to get experience of more research independence
- Excellent opportunity for networking and gaining new skills
- Often short-term (0.5-3 years), can be really disruptive to personal life

# Fellowships

A gateway to academic independence...



**European Research Council**  
Established by the European Commission



**IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL**  
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



**Natural  
Environment  
Research Council**

**LEVERHULME  
TRUST** \_\_\_\_\_

**Put your well-being first! Tired of rejection? Applications create too much anxiety? Writing proposals is not your thing?**

**“Regular” postdocs are cool too! And most people leaving academia are super happy and are much more comfortable financially! Fellowships (and academia) not worth it if you don’t feel happy and valued.**

- **Gain experience in writing research proposals (core part of academic jobs)**
- **Create new collaborations**
- **Create new research ideas**
- **Demonstrate to colleagues and institutions that you are highly motivated and determined**

## Fellowship proposals answer questions

- What is the ‘big’ science question you want to answer?
  - *Something you find exciting and will generate new knowledge for the community*
  - *Something that takes appropriate **risk** (likely to be big step forward, not likely to fail)*
  - *Makes full use of the time and resources available but is also tractable*
- Why is answering this question important?
  - *The justification can be purely fundamental*
- Why is it important to answer this question now?
  - *Timeliness resulting from a unique event, new technology, new collaboration*
- How will you answer the question?
  - *Often framed as ‘objectives’ seeking to answer specific ‘aims’ by delivering units of research that are often called ‘work packages’*
  - *Also includes a description of methods, collaborations and project management*
- Why are you the right person to do this?
  - *What skills do you bring (track record) and what will you learn?*

## What is a good track record?

Publications Publications Publications!!??

## Don't panic....

*Yes, publications help.....*

Your track record is made up of your publication record **and** your previous experience

A good track record is one that demonstrate your capacity to successfully carry out the proposed research project

## Remember:

- Apply for a fellowship that is suitable for your career stage and track record
- Design your project proposal around your experience
- Demonstrate your relevant skills and potential as a researcher
- Your track record is judged by your career stage and background, not in straight competition with other applicants



- **Ideal recipe for postdoc fellowship = two-way knowledge exchange.** You will bring a new expertise to host group/institution while learning new skills, and combine this to deliver an exciting project that can only be done with this unique combination of expertise.
- Host institution needs the right facilities you need for your research project
- **Choose somewhere where you think you will be happy!**
  - Apply somewhere where you'd love to live!
  - Choose a host/mentor who will put your wellbeing first, and whose group is welcoming with a healthy research culture
  - It's ok to stay at the same place if that's what you want!
- Find a host academic who will:
  - **Truly see you as an independent researcher**
  - **Support you** (including for developing a proposal)
  - Has the right skill-set and network for your project
  - Challenge you! You want to learn new things and be put out of your comfort zone.



*These are schemes for UK/Ireland based institutions, ask us about international schemes!*

## Postdoctoral fellowships

(~2-4 years-long, *usually* if you are 0-5 years post-phd, for researchers who have never held a permanent academic contract)


- EU Marie-Curie fellowship (success rate ~14%)
- Leverhulme Trust research fellowship (success rate 6-8%)
- Royal Society Newton International Fellowship (success rate ~5%)
- Oxbridge's Junior Research Fellowships (success rate ~1%)
- 1851 Research Fellowships (success rate ~1%)
- Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Scholarship (success rate ~15%)

## Group-building fellowships

(~4-7 years-long, *usually* if you are 2-7 years post-phd)

- NERC Independent Research Fellowship (success rate ~20%)
- Royal Society University Research Fellowship (success rate 7-8%)
- European Research Council Starting Grant (success rate ~15%)
- Future Leader Fellowship (success rate 11-18%)
- Branco-Weiss Fellowship (success rate 1-3%)

**Full summary information for key schemes at the end of this powerpoint!**

European Research Council Starting Grant 

**Eligibility:** 2-7 years post PhD  
**Timeline:** annual deadline in October  
**Host support:** required, budget approval typically required before submission. Research offices well prepared for ERCs  
**Funds:** 1.5M, up to 1M additional for key pieces of kit/fieldwork - expectation to hire multiple students/postdocs  
**Duration:** 5 years  
**Application:** full CV, full budget (inc. overheads), 5-page initial proposal (B1), 14-page full proposal (B2)  
**Assessment:** novelty and innovation, high-risk high-reward. B1 is assessed by first panel (likely scientific, non-expert). If successful, B2 is then assessed by expert reviewers. Interview follows with third panel.

Fellowship Writing Workshop, VMSG24 vmsg.contact@gmail.com

# Panel Discussion #1

Ask anonymously at [menti.com](https://www.menti.com)  
use code **4591 9044**

**First page:** clearly state all the good stuff! This should include a clear testable **hypothesis** set in the relevant **context** and a summary of the **project aims**

Use the **key words** from the assessment criteria

Use **figures** to craft a narrative

State-of-the-art: build up a picture of the current knowledge in the discipline, with a view to leading to your hypothesis

**Your contribution** to existing knowledge: why you?

**Project design** is normally presented through a series of **work packages** that may have collaborators listed - WPs may be organised by objective, or by method

Include a brief summary at the end of the proposal

Make your **CV** work for you, e.g. include a brief narrative CV, map your publications to the proposed project

Include a **realistic timeline**

**Remember:** the reviewer has no time! Make their job as easy as possible

*Bonus tip: Make it fun and do it with friends!*

- Get feedback on ideas and plans before writing
- Be ambitious
- Be clear and organized, and make the proposal snazzy!
- Make sure that all key points are accessible to a non-expert audience: there might be no expert involved in the panel discussion or even review!
- Put yourself at the center of the proposal: active voice, first person, etc...Your ideas and your lead!
- Put your imposter syndrome on pause; this is no place to be modest! (but also don't sound arrogant)

## Before:

- Build an international network of collaborators and mentors
- Advertise your work (papers, conferences, workshops, social media, podcasts, etc...)
- Make sure you are eligible...
- Contact your target host plenty of time ahead (ideally >0.5-1 year): you might have to find alternative host, they are busy, they might know schemes you are not aware of with deadline coming soon

## During

- Be aware of scheme and internal host deadlines!
- Get examples of successful proposals for the schemes you are applying for (happy to share ours!)
- Plan ahead (started preparing most schemes 4-8 months ahead)
- Have experienced academics and mentors review your proposals at various stages!
- Give plenty of notice to your referees for letters

## After

- Prepare as many application as possible! Once written, most proposal can be tweaked for other schemes

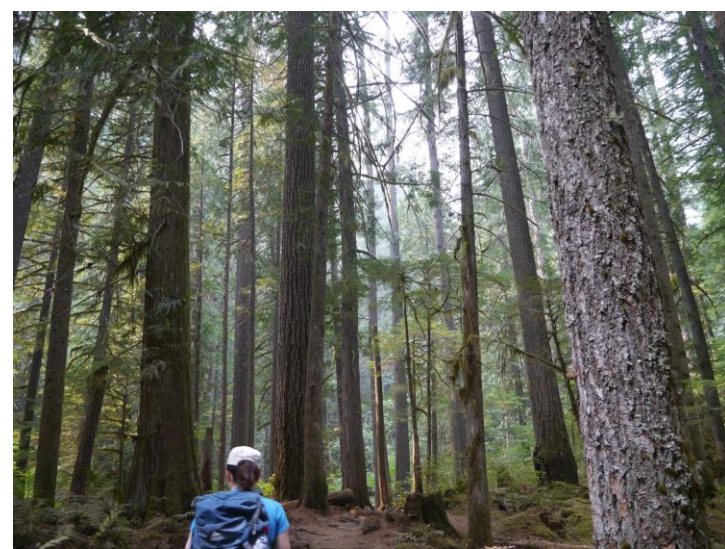




Caveat: Mostly, this is from the NERC angle...

- Fellowships are all about the *individual*;
- The science is important, but generally panels are looking for future research leaders;
- To reach the sunlit uplands: Need to demonstrate *track record* (papers, prizes), *independence*, and *significance/impact*.

Score	Usual Indicators
10	The applicant is on a clear trajectory to become a world-class research leader (A6). The proposed work is outstanding in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact (R6). Highest priority for funding.
9	The applicant is on a clear trajectory to become a world-class research leader (A6). The proposed work is excellent in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact (R5). OR The applicant is likely to become a world class research leader (A5). The proposed work is outstanding in terms of quality, significance and scientific impact (R6). Very high priority for funding.



- Two stage process: *review panel* and *interview panel*;
- *Review panel*: decide to short-list, borderline, or reject. based on three introducers who will have read your proposal in detail. (30-40 proposals -> 12).
- Common pitfalls at this stage:
  - Too much! Cannot see the “wood for the trees” overly granular, too many acronyms, too ‘dense’. Each introducer will read 6-7 proposals... don’t make this tedious!
  - Too lean and too “incremental” - the death knell of many a proposal. Boring...
  - Too corporate: if I read another statement about “paradigm shift” or “for the first time...” I will go mad...
- What to get “right”? ... there’s no magic bullet BUT:
  - Why are YOU the ONLY one to do this project?
  - What’s your unique selling point (experience?)
  - What is significant, impactful, and timely about the science?

# Panel Discussion #2

Ask anonymously at [menti.com](https://www.menti.com)  
use code **4591 9044**

# Quick reference guide: Summary of key schemes

**Eligibility:** PhD at the called deadline, max 8 years post PhD, cannot apply in a country where you have lived >12 months in the 3 years before call deadline

**Timeline:** annual, normally September deadline

**Host support:** required, must demonstrate knowledge transfer between applicant and host institution

**Funds:** varied based on location, ~5k/month gross, family allowance, up to 800/month research expenses

**Duration:** 2 years for European, 3 years for global

**Application:** 10 page proposal, CV, host university profile

**Assessment:** marked 0-5 against rubric for Excellence (50%), Impact (30%) and Implementation (20%). Realistically need 4.5-5 in each category



**Eligibility:** must have a PhD by start of fellowship, must not have held a permanent academic post, must hold a UK degree or have been in continuous UK academic employment for 4 months prior to deadline. Max 4 years post PhD.

**Timeline:** annual deadlines in February

**Host support:** required, must provide 50% salary

**Funds:** 50% of total salary costs up to 26k/year, up to 6k/year research expenses

**Duration:** 3 years

**Application:** 2 page proposal, full budget, details of past and current research

**Assessment:** will be assessed by specialists and non-specialists

**Eligibility:** PhD must be completed by start of fellowship, <7 years postdoc experience, applicant must be working outside of UK and not hold UK citizenship

**Timeline:** annual deadlines in March

**Host support:** sponsor should provide support during application preparation. Institution must commit to provision of facilities

**Funds:** up to £420,000 over 3 years, to cover salary costs, research expenses, relocation costs (+ for dependents) and indirect costs

**Duration:** 3 years

**Application:** supporting statements/references required from 5 people (inc. HI, UK sponsor, current supervisor). Research proposal max 3 pages, plus 500 word training programme, budget

**Assessment:** quality of applicant, research proposal and suitability of host institution, reviewed by 2 members of assessment panel



**Eligibility:** aimed at finishing PhD students (or 1-2 years within PhD), “first substantial academic position after a PhD”, Oxbridge PhD not required but some structural bias

**Timeline:** advertised on individual college websites from August to January

**Host support:** generally offered by wealthier Oxbridge colleges, need a mentor within a college

**Funds:** 3-4 years stipend (variable ~25-40k+) and research expenses (up to a few thousand per year), college benefits (e.g. free flat in Oxbridge center compensating small stipend)

**Duration:** 3-4 years

**Application:** academic CV, 1 page research summary, 1 page research proposal

**Assessment:** longlisting, shortlisting, followed by interview, standard scientific review

**Eligibility:** up to 3 years post PhD, can apply in final year of PhD

**Timeline:** annual deadline, has varied Oct-January

**Host support:** host willing to pay overheads if you want to be employed instead of visiting (e.g. pension etc.), HoD support letter required at application

**Funds:** does not include overheads, full salary cover (can be employed by institution or self-employed), research costs up to 10k/year

**Duration:** 3 years

**Application:** 2 page proposal, CV, and interview, no budget

**Assessment:** highly competitive (around 8 awards per year), must build a case for transformative research

**Eligibility:** 5 years post-PhD, can apply before graduating, must have been a postdoc for <5 years, no permanent contract

**Timeline:** annual call deadline in mid October

**Host support:** requires a mentor at an Irish host institution

**Funds:** salary of ~€42-43k, research costs of 5k/year

**Duration:** 1-2 years

**Application:** ~5000 word project proposal plus 2 page development plan, no interview

**Assessment:** 30% applicant, 35% project, 25% training plan, 10% host institution suitability

**Eligibility:** hold a PhD or soon to graduate, no limit on years of experience, no previous independent fellowship

**Timeline:** annual deadlines in September-October, interviews in March

**Host support:** required, HoD must submit support letter at application

**Funds:** no funding limits, will provide 80% costs, does not fund studentships

**Duration:** 5 years

**Application:** summary, 6 page vision and approach, career development plan, applicant 'capability to deliver', resource justification

**Assessment:** NERC is risk-averse. Scientific review plus interview panel

**Eligibility:** 3-8 years post PhD, do not hold permanent post, have not previously held research group building fellowship

**Timeline:** annual deadline in September

**Host support:** required, must provide 20% of salary

**Funds:** 80% of salary (rest provided by host), 100% of research expenses up to 90k per year (could include support for postdocs, students), overheads. Max value 1.83M.

**Duration:** 8 years

**Application:** personal statement, 4 page proposal, budget

**Assessment:** scientific track record, scientific merit of project, suitability of host institution, interview

**Eligibility:** 2-7 years post PhD

**Timeline:** annual deadline in October

**Host support:** required, budget approval typically required before submission. Research offices well prepared for ERCs

**Funds:** 1.5M, up to 1M additional for key pieces of kit/fieldwork - expectation to hire multiple students/postdocs

**Duration:** 5 years

**Application:** full CV, full budget (inc. overheads), 5-page initial proposal (B1), 14-page full proposal (B2)

**Assessment:** novelty and innovation, high-risk high-reward. B1 is assessed by first panel (likely scientific, non-expert). If successful, B2 is then assessed by expert reviewers. Interview follows with third panel.

**Eligibility:** 0-5 years post PhD, no permanent position

**Timeline:** annual deadline mid-January

**Host support:** Evidence of support required

**Funds:** 600,000 CHF (~550,000£)

**Duration:** 5 years

**Application:** CV (max 4 pages) 5-page proposal, 1-page motivation letter

**Assessment:** Project should be in line with Branco Weiss mission statement (scientific excellence, independent research, intellectual Curiosity and Social Commitment, communication skills, mobility) and “departs from the mainstream of research in your discipline”