

# Australian Biochemist Students' Page

## Show me the money! Funding opportunities for Australians to work as overseas postdocs

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"Oh my God, I didn't get an NHMRC Training Fellowship.... my life is ruined!" may be the first thought running through your mind if you are not awarded an NHMRC overseas biomedical fellowship. Realistically, there are plenty of funding opportunities out there besides the NHMRC scheme, so if you are not successful in obtaining a postdoctoral fellowship from the NHMRC, it won't necessarily spell the end of your career.

Having decided on the lab where you will do your postdoc, you will probably be focussed on obtaining funding to support yourself. Your new postdoc supervisor will be aware of all the funding opportunities for foreign postdocs in the country and will be the best source to offer suggestions on which organisations you should apply to for funding.

Toward the end of my PhD, I applied for five fellowships: the overseas biomedical fellowship (NHMRC), the long-term fellowship (Human Frontiers Science Program [HFSP]) and three postdoctoral fellowships for foreigners (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR]; Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada; Fonds de la recherche en santé Québec [FRSQ]). I applied with the hope I would be awarded at least one fellowship, which would allow me to travel overseas to my new lab and start my postdoc. Although it is a great idea to submit many applications to improve your chances, it was an arduous process writing five applications for different funding agencies on top of trying to write my thesis and finishing experiments in the lab. Fellowship applications from the various organisations are at least quite similar, allowing you to recycle a lot of the information; however, the applications require a lot of thought, time and work. Even once you have all the sections written, often you have to try to squeeze all your ideas down into really small character limits (apparently teaching you to be concise), which can almost drive you crazy.

For success in your postdoctoral fellowship applications, you need to be active in the scientific community and you need to have published papers during your Honours/Masters and PhD. In fact, the HFSP and CIHR require applicants to have two first author papers to be eligible for their postdoctoral fellowships. The more conferences you attend, seminars you give, prizes you win, or students you supervise during your PhD, the better. All these things are positives in your application. During my PhD, my supervisor (Professor Roger Summers, Monash University) pushed me to go to many conferences every year, to take on an undergraduate student and supervise him with a mini-research project in the lab, and to write reviews, as well as to pursue my experimental research in the lab. Some days, I wanted to kill him for making me do so many things, but when I was filling in the application forms for the different

funding organisations, I realised that all of these things that I did were assets, and that he was not trying to make my life a misery, he was actually trying to set me up for success for my future scientific career.



*Australians with varied postdoc funding (from left): Dr Karen Gregory (funded by the Conn lab), Dr Emma van der Westhuizen (funded by CIHR) and Dr Katherine Jackman (funded through an Australian American Fellowship and an NHMRC overseas biomedical fellowship).*

Typically, fellowship applications ask for a project title and paragraphs on obvious things like a project abstract, a summary of the research project, a lay summary suitable for the media, the facilities you will have access to during your post-doc, keywords, your supervisory experience, invited seminars, your journal club/departmental presentations, your publication list (including conference abstracts) and society memberships (e.g., ASBMB). They also ask for more personal details, such as the reasons for selecting a foreign training environment, an overview of your research training, a summary of your career development, your research goals, your career interruptions or delays, why you should be awarded this fellowship, and your achievements and prizes. Then there are referees' reports from two or three people, like your supervisors for your PhD, Honours, Masters, student projects or past employers to support your application.

The fellowships offered in Canada range from \$30,000-\$40,000 per annum and they are taxable. The Canadian fellowships are offered for two years; however, if you are lucky enough to be awarded multiple fellowships from the different Canadian organisations, you have to choose which one you will take and reject the funding from the other organisations. The FRSQ offer a third-year renewal on their fellowships and allow you to reject the first two years of funding in order to accept a fellowship from another organisation. You can then reapply for the third-year renewal after the receipt of the fellowship from the other organisation.

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As for my PhD student colleagues, they have received funding for their postdocs from the European Commission (Marie-Curie Fellowship), EMBO, American Australian Foundation, American Heart Association and, alternatively, from their postdoc supervisor's grants. So despite many of us not receiving an NHMRC Training Fellowship the first time around, we have all had success elsewhere and been able to pursue our careers in an international field. Saying that, many of my former student colleagues and I have applied for the NHMRC overseas biomedical fellowships again, hoping for success the second time around.

## Organisations that offer postdoctoral fellowships for Australians wanting to do an overseas postdoc

### Canada

- Canadian Institutes for Health Research (2 years; \$40,000 per year)
- Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada (2 years; \$40,000 per year)
- Fonds de la recherche en santé Québec (2 years, with the option for a 3rd year renewal; \$30,000 per year)

### UK

- European commission Marie-Curie fellowship (2 years)
- Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
- Royal Society
- In Cambridge (and probably Oxford), you can also apply to the colleges for junior research fellowships, which will provide accommodation (or an allowance if you'd rather live outside the college) and salary, and may include travel and IT allowances (3 years)
- EMBO (2 years)
- Wellcome Trust

### USA

- American Australian Foundation (1 year; \$25,000)
- American Heart Association
- NARSAD Young Investigator (2 years; \$30,000)
- Fulbright
- Sir Keith Murdoch

### Other

- Human Frontiers Science Program

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