Prosper PI Network session– follow up resources

Learning

**1. Supporting Postdocs at Career Crossroads**

Postdocs are navigating a pivotal—and often uncertain—stage in their careers. Many lack clarity, confidence, and support to explore their options, whether in academia or beyond. Some avoid career conversations entirely, fearing judgment because they think they should already know or appearing unprepared or the perception that they’re “off track.”

Importantly, for many, non-academic roles are/will be their Plan A. Yet, they often:

* struggle to translate their research skills into language relevant for roles outside academia, nor do they know what skills that employers value.
* lack visibility of sectors, companies, and networks beyond the university.
* feel isolated in exploring alternatives, especially without structured guidance.

Even for those committed to academic careers, the path to securing funding and tenure is often opaque and more and more complex with funders and institutions now expecting more than research novelty—they look for clear, real-world impact and engagement with societal, economic, or policy relevance.

PIs and managers of researchers experience that researchers find it challenging to put their research into context – why it matters, who it could help and how it connects to broader challenges. Communicating the long-term value or relevance is particularly tough when research is early stage or doesn’t have an obvious application. Researchers also often feel stuck when trying to adapt their message for different audiences, making it harder to stand out in funding applications, to build collaborations across disciplines and to show the broader impact of their work.

As a PI, you don’t need to be a careers expert to make a difference. What’s needed is creating an environment that encourages open dialogue and cultivates a mindset that connects research to broader societal and economic value. Providing structure and tools that empower researchers in shaping their ideas into strong research projects and confidence to communicate their ideas to diverse stakeholder. This also helps them to identify professional development opportunities; develop their networks and explore divers career paths.

**2. Entrepreneurial Thinking Benefits All Researchers—not Just Founders**

There is still a common belief that academic research and commercial innovation are separate worlds. This belief discourages many researchers from exploring entrepreneurial thinking or engaging with business-relevant skills.

Yet, entrepreneurial thinking encourages researchers to focus early on real-world problems, engage potential stakeholders, and collaborators, and the path from research to product or service —making their work more relevant and impactful, while also supporting career development by building transferable skills and uncovering potential pathways to non-academic roles in industry, policy, and innovation.

Embedding entrepreneurial thinking and skills empowers researchers to design impactful, fundable, and career-enabling research while also sensitising researchers to commercialisation journeys. This means that more researchers may take their ideas beyond the lab into the world, ultimately increasing the University’s commercialisation and spin-out success.

**3. Connect Research Planning with Impact, Skills, and Career Development**

PIs and Managers of researchers can encourage researchers to shape their research ideas by proactively building networks and engaging outside the lab to gain insights in and help to define the real-world relevance of their research.

The transferable skills they gain along the way—such as understanding stakeholder needs, communicating value, planning for impact, financial literacy and pitching ideas to range of stakeholders help researchers become more effective at research planning, building collaborations and securing grants, but also support diverse career options

**4. Use Practical Tools Like the Research Canvas to Structure Conversations**

The business inspired **Research Canvas** is a simple, visual tool that supports researchers in designing impactful research projects while also supporting career development. It’s designed to:

* frame research in terms of value creation, stakeholder relevance, and broader impact. It helps postdocs see how their work connects to broader ecosystems—academic, industrial, and societal
* identify key assumptions, gaps, and key stakeholders to engage for insights
* help with strategic decisions:
	+ Is the idea ready to pursue now?
	+ Does it need more data, collaborators, or validation?
	+ Should it be reframed to better fit a specific funding opportunity?
* be a living document that evolves with input from stakeholders to make the research vision and proposition clear and compelling before tailoring of funding applications
* highlight a range of skills that researchers can seek training in at their institution

**The Payoff for PIs and Institutions**

For PIs and HEIs, the payoff can also be significant. PIs can use frameworks such as the Research Canvas to align their team to their/the team’s overall research vision and for structuring and stress-testing new research directions in their own work.

Teams that understand and communicate impact make the group more innovative, more competitive, better at gaining funding and more successful over the long term.

Supporting researchers in developing professionally also aligns with institutional KPIs and can support a PI’s own progression toward tenure or promotion. The lab benefits from increased visibility through broader networks, collaborations, consulting capacity and potential spinouts, boosting its reputation in academic, industry, policy, and public spheres.

**Action ideas**

**Introduce the Research Canvas during team meetings or proposal development discussions**

* Use it to help early-career researchers develop research ideas - think through all aspects that make a research proposal competitive – focus on aligning with challenges, funding priorities
* Use the Canvas to match researcher’s ideas with potential funding calls or industry interests.
* Encourage researchers to fill in the Research Canvas before they reach out to grant administrators/research facilitators

**Support researchers in identifying and building skills beyond the lab**

* Use the Research Canvas to identify specific skills and encourage participation in workshops that develop e.g. communication, stakeholder identification, project planning.
* Practice research “elevator pitches” in group meetings using the Canvas as a foundation. Invite collaborators or non-academic stakeholders to provide guidance and feedback on project presentations

**Embed the Research Canvas in mentoring conversations and funding strategy sessions**

* Treat it as both a training and planning tool—helping your team grow while aligning with funder expectations.
* Develop and share your own Research Canvas maps for new member onboarding and for communicating new research directions.

Coach yourself question(s)

* What am I doing to equip my team with the tools and mindset to turn good ideas into fundable, impactful research projects?
* How intentional am I in supporting my ECRs to move from guided researchers to independent thinkers?
* What am I doing to prepare my team for diverse research careers—within and beyond academia?
* How might structured tools like the Research Canvas help my team develop stronger, fundable research propositions? What other ways might you want to use the Research Canvas?
* How effective am I at clearly articulating my group’s overall research value proposition/research vision to align my team and how their research projects fit?

Recommended resources

**The European competence framework for researchers**

This framework emphasizes the comprehensive skill set required for researchers to thrive, contributing effectively to academia, industry, and society

https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-04/ec\_rtd\_research-competence-presentation.pdf

**Entrepreneurship and Academic Employment - More alike than you'd think**

<https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Similarities-between-entrepreneurship-and-academic-employment-the-three-dimensional_fig1_284517206>

**Researchers can adopt effectuation principles**  – a way of thinking and making decisions identified in entrepreneurs. They can take action with the resources and knowledge and connections they already have—testing ideas, limiting risks while learning fast, forming partnerships—rather than waiting for perfect conditions to pursue opportunities.

<https://effectuation.org/the-five-principles-of-effectuation>

**Research Canvas**

<https://www.postdocacademy.cam.ac.uk/research-canvas>

# **9 ways entrepreneurial training prepares researchers for academic and non-academic careers – includes testimonials from researchers that have engaged in training**

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/9-ways-entrepreneurial-training-prepares-researchers-yqkpe/

**edX Course: University of Cambridge: Researcher to Innovator and Entrepreneur**

[https://www.edx.org/learn/business-management/university-of-cambridge-researcher-to-innovator-and-entrepreneur](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.edx.org%2Flearn%2Fbusiness-management%2Funiversity-of-cambridge-researcher-to-innovator-and-entrepreneur&data=05%7C02%7CKatia.Smith-Litiere%40admin.cam.ac.uk%7C85add3981bf74ee29da208dda99891ea%7C49a50445bdfa4b79ade3547b4f3986e9%7C1%7C0%7C638853194930500842%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJFbXB0eU1hcGkiOnRydWUsIlYiOiIwLjAuMDAwMCIsIlAiOiJXaW4zMiIsIkFOIjoiTWFpbCIsIldUIjoyfQ%3D%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=3BbTdlbCfDkD0UNVzMqRxYQxTwatYGKpqxaje2jHEjI%3D&reserved=0)