
WESTERN UNIVERSITY GUIDE

FOR POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLAR SUPERVISION AND MENTORSHIP

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Appointment Types and Funding Sources	4
Laying the Groundwork for Success: Initial Discussions	5
The Training Plan	6
Research/Scholarly Goals	6
Teaching Goals	6
Professional Development Goals	7
Checklist for Regular Review	8
Setting Expectations for Mentorship	9
Table 1: Setting Expectations for Mentorship	10
Conflict in the PDS-Supervisor Relationship	11
Resources	11

Introduction

The Postdoctoral Scholar (PDS) is a valued member of the University community. Western University defines a PDS as an individual who recently received their doctoral degree, who is expected to produce and disseminate scholarly outputs during the appointment period, and who will work independently with a faculty member.

Typically, most PDS appointments at Western last between two and four years. In this capacity, the PDS may:

- help plan and carry out research and other scholarly activities
- build collaborations with other national and international institutions
- raise the reputation of department
- mentor students
- contribute to increased grant support

In seeking the opportunity to train or work further in a particular area of research, scholarship, or creative activity, the PDS is expected to work collaboratively with faculty members.

The key difference between a PDS and someone providing technical or research support is that a PDS is expected to work relatively independently, and work toward an independent skillset designed to enhance their qualifications for positions in academia, or in the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

This guide is intended to support PDS success by making recommendations for effective postdoctoral supervision and mentorship strategies.

Appointment Types and Funding Sources

At Western, there are two types of relationships that a faculty supervisor and a PDS may enter – Postdoctoral Fellow or Postdoctoral Associate.

Most often, a PDS is identified and recruited by an individual faculty member to work on a specific research grant. A PDS can secure funding from an external granting agency or fellowship program, or may be offered funding from their faculty supervisor's grant or other research resources.

The rates of compensation and applicable policies vary depending upon the funding agency. The source of funding determines whether the prospective PDS is appointed as a Fellow or as an Associate.

A PDS who receives more than 90 per cent of their funding from an external source (awarded to the PDS and not to the supervisor) is designated as a Fellow, is not considered an employee of Western, and is viewed as an independent contractor.

A PDS who receives more than 10 per cent of their funding from a supervisor's research grant or contract, or from a research unit of the University, is designated as an Associate, and is considered an employee of Western. The terms and conditions of their working relationship with the supervisor are governed by the collective agreement with the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC 610). Under the collective agreement, the expectation is that within the first two weeks of the appointment, the Postdoctoral Associate and their faculty supervisor must discuss research expectations, including associated duties and responsibilities. They must also complete their Professional Development Plan.

The terms and conditions of a Postdoctoral Fellow are outlined by the granting agency that provides their funding. In some cases, a single faculty supervisor will mentor both Fellows and Associates, or the classification of a PDS may change based on the funding mechanism.

For an international PDS, regardless of appointment classification (Associate or Fellow), a work permit is required before being appointed at Western. The processing time for work permits varies depending on the country of residence and citizenship. A delay in getting a work permit could impact the start date and duration of a contract.

Laying the Groundwork for Success: Initial Discussions

Here, we provide an overview of key, sometimes overlapping issues for both the potential PDS and supervisor to discuss when considering a “good fit” between a PDS and a supervisor at Western. The potential PDS and supervisor should discuss a preliminary training plan, similar to the more formal postdoctoral training plan to be completed upon formal appointment (see Section IV below). Doing so will provide a good framework for discussing career goals, and the key training needs and desires of the PDS, along with the supervisor’s resources and expectations.

Although there need not be a perfect fit between the PDS’s goals and the specific position to have a successful experience at Western, ideally a discussion of the plan will indicate that most of the needs of both parties can be met. Reviewing the information in this document will set everyone up for ongoing success.

1. Discuss the expectations of both parties regarding the role of the PDS at Western, more broadly. Does the potential supervisor envision a co-supervisory role of the PDS with any graduate or undergraduate students working in the lab or research team? Will there be ongoing responsibilities of the PDS related to the smooth functioning of the lab or other academic groups? Will classroom instruction be part of the PDS experience? While all these activities can be a useful training experience, they should be discussed in advance.
2. An early conversation about the anticipated frequency and structure of meetings between the potential PDS and supervisor is critical. As a general recommendation, we recommend planning regular, frequent contact, especially initially, to ensure that the appointment gets off to a strong start. Initial discussions prior to offering an appointment are also an important opportunity to discuss general communication styles and work preferences. The PDSs are expected to work on campus, in person.
3. An open discussion of financial (and other) resources available to the PDS is important. Discuss funding for the position, including duration and sources, and opportunities for extending funding after current sources are exhausted. Any obligations associated with the funding sources (e.g., work on a specific project) should be noted. This is also the time to talk about financial support for other research or scholarly activities to be conducted by the PDS, conference travel, coverage of open access fees, and other expenditures that may arise from activities.

It’s important to note that not all resources relevant to PDS training are financial – availability of relevant equipment, office space, computing resources, and other infrastructure needed for the work to be done by the PDS should be discussed. Further, this may be an appropriate time to consider whether the expertise of other people at Western, or in industry, would be beneficial to the training of the PDS. In particular, many PDSs desire and benefit from industry connections; as not all academics have such connections, it may be useful to troubleshoot ways to connect the PDS with relevant industry contacts sooner, rather than later.

The Training Plan

Western has an official PDS training plan that should be completed at the time of the initial appointment. Goals highlighted in this plan include research/scholarly goals, teaching, and professional development.

Research/Scholarly Goals

The PDS is expected to work on projects that align with their long-term career objectives, allowing them to build a strong foundation for future career independence. Key goals include:

- **Project Development:** The PDS should work closely with their mentor(s) to develop research projects that are innovative and impactful. This includes formulating scholarly questions and planning appropriate strategies for answering them, in the service of gaining experience in all aspects of the scholarly process, from conception to publication.
- **Publication Strategy:** The development of a robust publication strategy is a critical component of the PDS training plan. PDS's are encouraged to target high-impact journals and conferences for their work. Regular meetings with mentors should focus on setting publication timelines, identifying suitable outlets, and receiving feedback on manuscripts.
- **Grant Writing Experience:** To prepare for future independence, PDS's should gain experience writing grants. This includes identifying funding opportunities, drafting proposals, and collaborating on grants. The goal is to equip the PDS with the skills necessary to secure their own research funding in the future.
- **Ethical conduct of research and other scholarly outputs:** Western has numerous resources to support ethical scholarly conduct to assist the PDS. Supervisors must be mindful of their obligation to ensure that all PDS scholarly endeavours are conducted ethically.

Teaching Goals

Teaching can be an important part of the professional development of Postdoctoral Fellows, particularly for those pursuing academic careers. In discussions with the supervisor, the training plan may include the following teaching goals:

- **Classroom Experience:** PDSs should seek opportunities to gain teaching experience, whether through guest lecturing, course development, or leading seminars. This experience is invaluable in developing a teaching portfolio and refining pedagogical skills.
- **Teaching Philosophy Development:** PDSs are encouraged to draft and regularly update a teaching philosophy statement. This document should reflect their

approach to teaching, including strategies for creating inclusive and effective learning environments.

- **Knowledge of Inclusive Teaching Practices:** Special attention should be given to classroom inclusivity and cultural awareness. They should incorporate best practices for addressing the diverse needs of students, ensuring an equitable learning experience for all.

Feedback and Improvement: Regular feedback on teaching performance should be sought from students, peers, and mentors. PDSs should be open to constructive criticism and use it to improve their teaching skills. To help meet these goals, the PDS can participate in various professional development opportunities provided by Western's Centre for Teaching and Learning. For example, certificates for university teaching are available upon completion of intensive workshops focused on pedagogy in higher education.

Professional Development Goals

Professional development is essential for Postdoctoral Fellows to succeed in both academic and non-academic careers. Supervisors should consider how they can assist PDSs in achieving the following goals:

- **Networking and Leadership Experience:** The PDS should actively participate in professional networking events, such as conferences and workshops, to build connections within and outside their field. Taking on leadership roles, such as organizing seminars or serving on committees, may help develop essential administrative and service skills.
- **Mentorship Experience:** Engaging in mentorship, either by supervising students or participating in formal mentoring programs, is a key component of the training plan. This experience will help the PDS develop their ability to guide and support others in their academic and professional journeys.
- **Development of Communication Skills:** The PDS should focus on developing their writing and public speaking skills through regular practice and feedback. This includes:
 - Writing for both academic and non-academic audiences.
 - Delivering presentations at conferences and seminars.
- **Career Exploration:** To prepare for a variety of potential careers, the PDS may explore possibilities such as industry positions, consulting, or science communication. Preparation for these careers may include:
 - Identifying transferable skills.
 - Building connections with industry professionals.
 - Considering professional certifications relevant to their career goals.

- **Developing Work-Life Balance:** Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is crucial for long-term success. The PDS should develop time management strategies, and establish boundaries to ensure they can achieve their professional goals without compromising their well-being. Mentors can play a valuable role in fostering the development of this skill through open discussions with the PDS about work-life balance.

Checklist for Regular Review

- ☐ **Research/Scholarly Progress:** Regularly review productivity goals, publication strategy, and grant writing involvement.
- ☐ **Teaching Development:** Assess teaching experience, philosophy, and inclusivity practices.
- ☐ **Professional Growth:** Evaluate networking, leadership roles, mentorship, communication skills, and exploration of careers.
- ☐ **Flexibility and Adaptation:** Be prepared to adjust the plan based on new opportunities, challenges, and feedback.

Regular check-ins with mentors will ensure that the plan remains relevant and supportive of the PDS's ongoing development. At minimum, we recommend monthly supervisor-PDS check-ins.

Setting Expectations for Mentorship

"Mentorship is a professional, working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support." - COMMITTEE ON EFFECTIVE MENTORING IN STEMM, The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019

A faculty member supervising a PDS in their research group can, and should, act as a mentor. For the purposes of this guidance document, we refer to this specific role as Supervisor/Mentor; however, additional valuable mentorship may be available from other academics and those working in relevant industry sectors. A PDS should have additional mentors, and may have more than one Supervisor/Mentor. All Supervisor/Mentors and their respective roles, should be clearly identified during the completion of the Professional Development Plan (PDP) at Step Five of the [Postdoctoral Scholar Appointment Process](#).

The completion of a PDP is recommended to define and bring transparency to long- and short-term expectations mutually highlighted by the PDS and their mentors as goals for professional development during their appointment at Western. To further assist with setting mentor/mentee expectations, and navigating challenges which may arise when expectations are not well-aligned, **Table 1** acts as a guide to early and ongoing conversations between the PDS and the Supervisor/Mentor. This table is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to provide suggestions for points of discussion in areas where challenges may arise.

As best practice, discussions of expectations for the mentor/mentee relationship should be initiated by the Supervisor/Mentor and/or PDS as early as possible.

Table 1: Setting Expectations for Mentorship

Expectation		Postdoctoral Scholar (PDS)	Supervisor/Mentor
Communication	By nature, mentoring relationships require open and ongoing communication. Conversations should be proactively initiated by both the PDS and the Supervisor/Mentor over the course of the relationship. It is incumbent on both the mentor and mentee to recognize any personal and/or cultural differences in communication style, and work toward mutually acceptable modes of communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet individually with the Supervisor/Mentor and/or additional mentors on a regular basis to provide updates on both research and non-research professional development activities Meetings should be scheduled respecting the time of the Supervisor/Mentor, wherever possible Be appropriately prepared for the meeting and feel empowered to set the agenda for the meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Devote time for individual meetings with the PDS to discuss progress on both research and non-research professional development Be prepared to offer psychosocial support as needed during individual meetings
Career Planning	The initial tool recommended for career planning is the PDP, which is completed at the conclusion of the appointment process; however, career planning is an ongoing activity which is most effective when approached proactively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be regularly engaged in career planning activities Should at a minimum include periodically reviewing, and potentially revising, the PDP, in consultation with the chosen mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactively support the PDS with career planning Begin with participation in the completion of the PDP and continue through ongoing encouragement of career planning activities Could include periodic discussion of, and help with, revision of the PDP, and sharing of additional career planning tools
Non-Research Skill Building	Skill building activities necessary for career success, that are not directly related to research activities, will vary across disciplines. One example that applies to most disciplines is networking. These activities, and opportunities to pursue them, should be identified early and incorporated into the PDP.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thoroughly explore the variety of excellent resources for non-research-related professional development available at Western University through SGPS, and other campus units as soon as possible after appointment, and on an ongoing basis Discuss any significant conflicts in opportunities to participate in non-research skill building with research activities with the Supervisor/Mentor at the earliest opportunity Although arrangements may be reached, the PDS cannot expect that all requests will be approved by the Supervisor/Mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquaint themselves with resources available at Western and elsewhere which may benefit the PDS Encourage PDS to seek opportunities for non-research skill building during regular mentoring meetings Endeavour to accommodate and facilitate requests to participate in non-research skill building activities wherever possible when the request is made in advance and likely to result in professional growth
Philosophical/ Ideological Alignment	Effective mentorship involves open discussion from a variety of perspectives, which is one reason the PDS is encouraged to engage several mentors from different areas through their PDP. There is no requirement for closely aligned philosophical or ideological perspectives between mentor(s) and mentee, as long as the goal of the relationship is to support professional growth, development, and success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be open to differing points of view and constructive feedback in relation to personal and professional growth Feel empowered to express differing views between the Supervisor/Mentor and other mentors, keeping in mind the common goals of the mentoring relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feel comfortable offering constructive feedback when warranted, while providing psychosocial support Keep in mind that the career path of the PDS is their own Purpose of mentorship is to support the success of the mentee The success of the PDS contributes to the success of the Supervisor/Mentor

Conflict in the PDS-Supervisor Relationship

Clear communication about goals for the PDS's appointment period at Western will hopefully mitigate the likelihood of significant disagreement (i.e. conflict) in the PDS-supervisor relationship; however, should problems arise, there are supports in place. As a first step, the PDS is encouraged to discuss concerns in a face-to-face meeting with the supervisor to see whether the concerns can be resolved through one-on-one discussion.

In the event of a problem related to their appointment that requires resolution, it is expected that the PDS will arrange an informal meeting with the faculty supervisor as soon as possible. If the problem remains unresolved, PDSs are encouraged to request a meeting with the Department Chair or Faculty Dean. If resolution is not possible through these interventions, any of the affected parties may request assistance from the Vice-Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies or designate in reaching a resolution.

There is an important distinction between conflict (significant disagreement) and harassment, which is "engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcomed", as defined by the Ontario Human Rights Code and Occupational Health and Safety Act. If a PDS is concerned that they are being harassed at Western, by a supervisor or another person, they are encouraged to contact Western's Human Rights Office.

Resources

The guidelines for postdoctoral fellows and postdoctoral associates are outlined under the [Manual of Administrative Policies and Procedures – Policy 7.6](#).

The [School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#) is the main point of contact for postdoctoral-related questions.

The [Collective Agreement for the Postdoctoral Associates](#) who are engaged in research and are employees of the University.

The [Western Technology Transfer Office](#) connects researchers, entrepreneurs, and partners with the resources they need to create meaningful impact.

Western's [Centre for Teaching and Learning](#) programs are open to postdoctoral scholars at Western.

[Indigenous Research](#)