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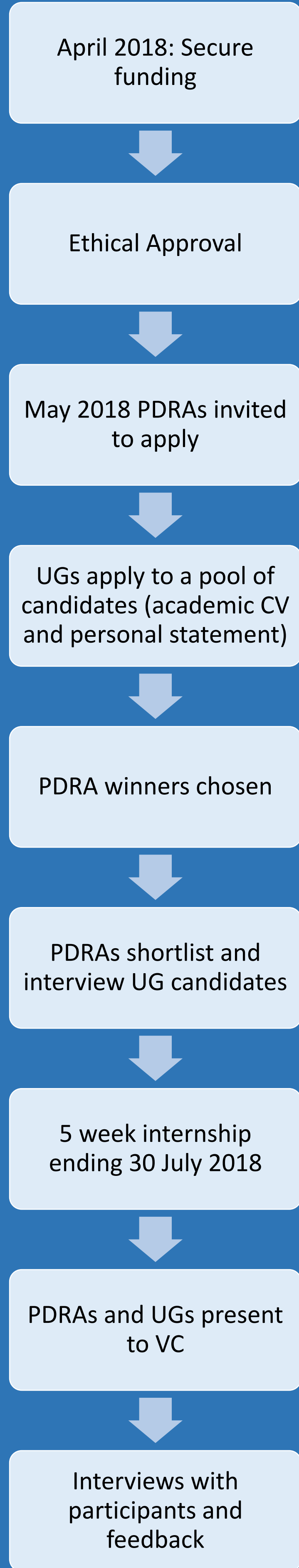
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Summer Vacation Research Competition: An opportunity for post-docs and undergraduates

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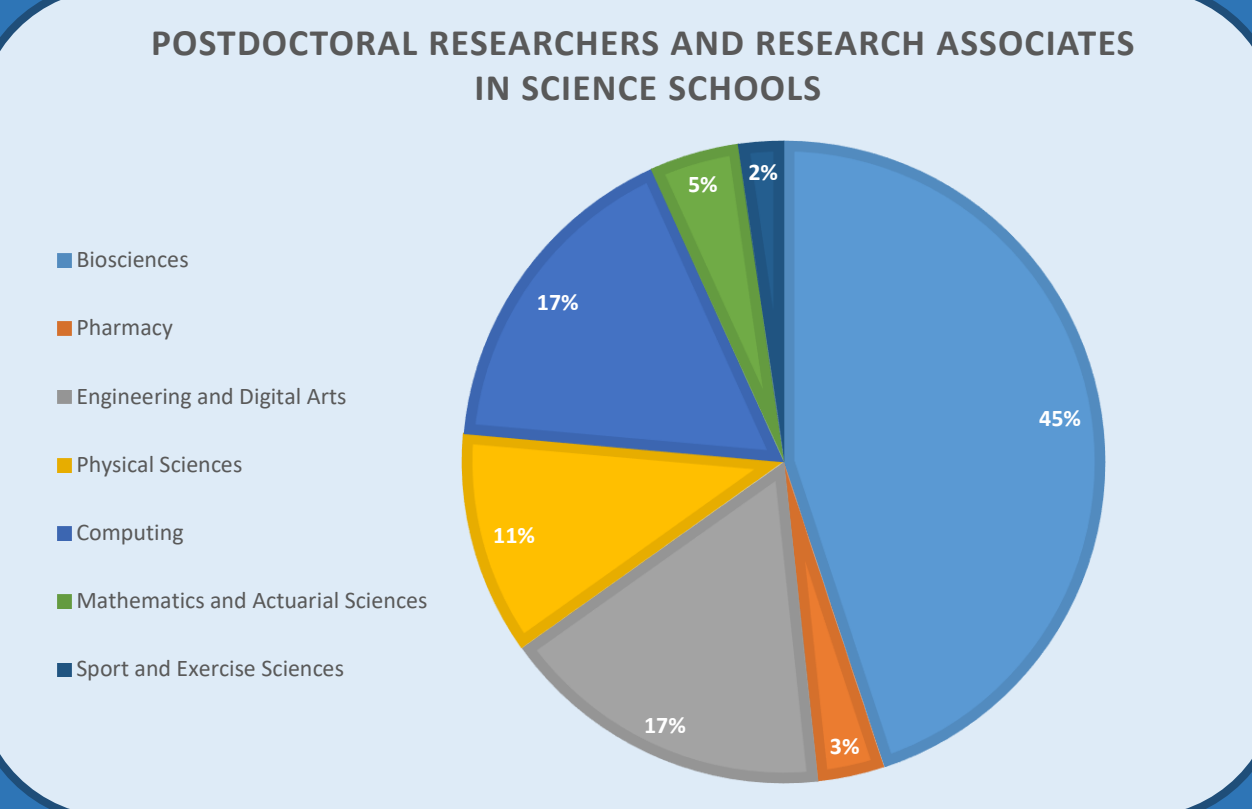
Need

Annual turnover rates for Postdoctoral Researchers (PDRAs) are 35-50% (McAlpine and Akerlind, 2010). PDRAs often lack support for advancement and promotion (Grinstein & Treister, 2018), yet they are key to Universities producing excellent research.

Our competition, at the University of Kent, gave PDRAs a specific opportunity to develop independent research. This created a supportive atmosphere for maintaining positivity about a research career (Grinstein & Treister, 2018), and a focus for career planning (Sauermann & Roach, 2016). In addition, it targeted Widening Participation Undergraduate (UG) students and gave them an opportunity to participate in cutting edge research.

Pilot

A large number of PDRAs are found in the Science Faculty at Kent. In order to support them, this pilot was funded by the Science Faculty, the Graduate School and Careers and Employability Service. Three prizes were funded. Each prize was £2100 to support a postdoctoral research project, with a second year undergraduate on the project for 4-6 weeks at a living wage of £350 a week.



Applications

We had PDRA applications from five of the seven schools in the Science Faculty. 5/7 of these and all of the winners were women.

50% of the UG applications were from women, and 3/4 were identified as Widening Participation students. All the UG winners were WP students.

Winning Projects

- Clathrates release due to impacts and the possible link to the methane content in the Martian atmosphere.
- Combinational drug therapy targeting elimination of bacterial infections for cancer patients.
- Comparative genomics as a means to understand genome evolution in primates.

“This project has changed the way I approach my studies”

Impact on UGs: The opportunity has increased the focus, aspirations and confidence of the UG students involved.

“I achieved more in 6 weeks than I would have working for a year on my own”

Research success: The project impacted on career aspirations and the confidence of postdoctoral researchers, which had a knock-on effect on their own research projects.

“All postdocs should have mentors!”

Mentoring -> Research as a career: PDRAs appreciated that the prize included a mentor and training, as these are beneficial to developing a successful academic career (Scaffidi & Berman, 2011; Xuhong, 2013). Since the competition, between them, they have applied for one lectureship and three fellowship opportunities.

Next steps

- Keeping in touch with Prize winners to see if there are any long-lasting effects on their careers.
- Continue to work with Schools to identify students interested in pursuing research trajectories at an earlier stage, as applications for MRes and PhD degrees happen early in the 3rd year cycle.
- Expanding the competition university wide (funded by Faculties, Careers and Employability Services and the Graduate School).
- 2019 Competition launching on the 11 December at a PDRA lunch with the Vice Chancellor.

References

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- Scaffidi, & Berman. (2011). A positive postdoctoral experience is related to quality supervision and career mentoring, collaborations, networking and a nurturing research environment. *Higher Education*, 62, 685-698.
- Xuhong, S. (2013) The impacts of postdoctoral training on scientists' academic employment. *Journal of Higher Education*, 84(2), 239-265.

“The competition is brilliant and a really good way for the university to support career development”
”The big thing was having independence- to get funding and do a project without a line manager”

Institutional targets and external recognition: Because the competition targeted PDRAs, the majority of whom are women, and attracted responses and winners from them, it exceeded Athena Swan expectations. Similarly, because it targeted and attracted Widening Participation UG students, it exceeded WP expectations. The competition was described as a **“beacon of excellence”** in an external report on postdoctoral support.

