

The effect of short-term contracts on career planning and choices: Early career researcher perspective

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Context: personal background

My research: **gravitational-wave astronomy**

My career:

- 2008-2012 - MPhys, University of Southampton, UK
- 2012-2016 - PhD, University of Southampton, UK
- 2016-2018 - Postdoc, AEI Hannover, Germany
- 2018-2020 - Assistant Lecturer, Monash University, Australia
- 2020-2021 - Teaching Fellow, Royal Holloway, UK
- 2021-2021 - Research Fellow, University of Portsmouth, UK
- 2021-pres. - Lecturer in Physics

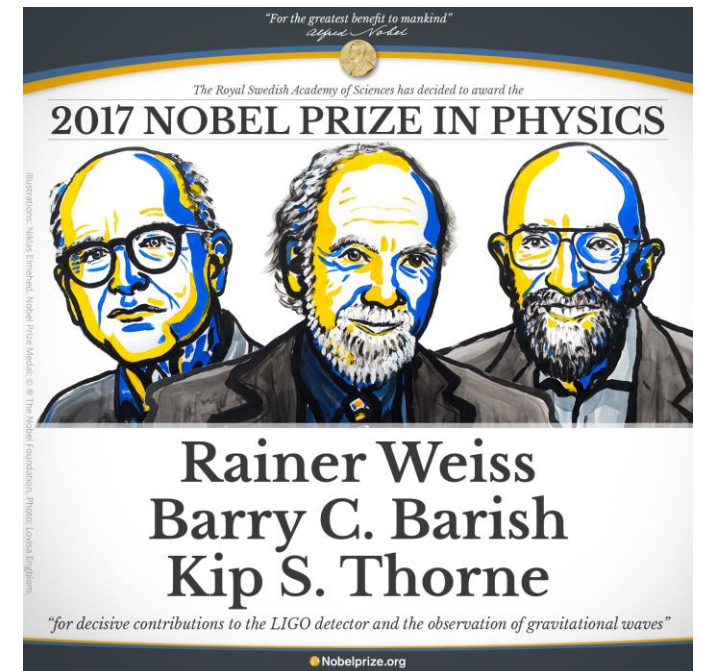


Fixed-term

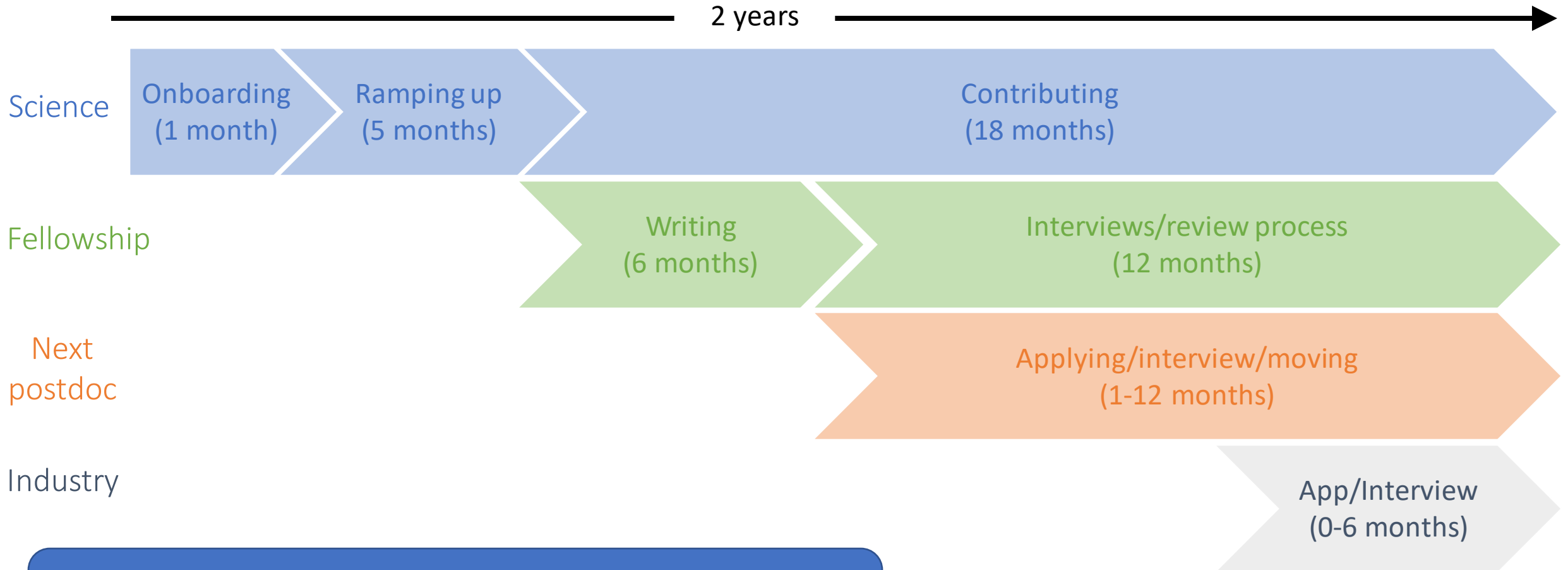
COVID-19

Context: personal background

- I've been unfortunate:
 - Partner has a career in fashion: remote relationships
 - Needed to live away to continue a research career
- Mostly, I've been advantaged:
 - Supportive partner who helped me work abroad
 - Supportive family with strong scientific capital
 - Supportive mentors and peers
 - Research field "exploded" during my PhD



A typical short-term postdoc



2 + 2 ≠ 4 due to the ramping-up time

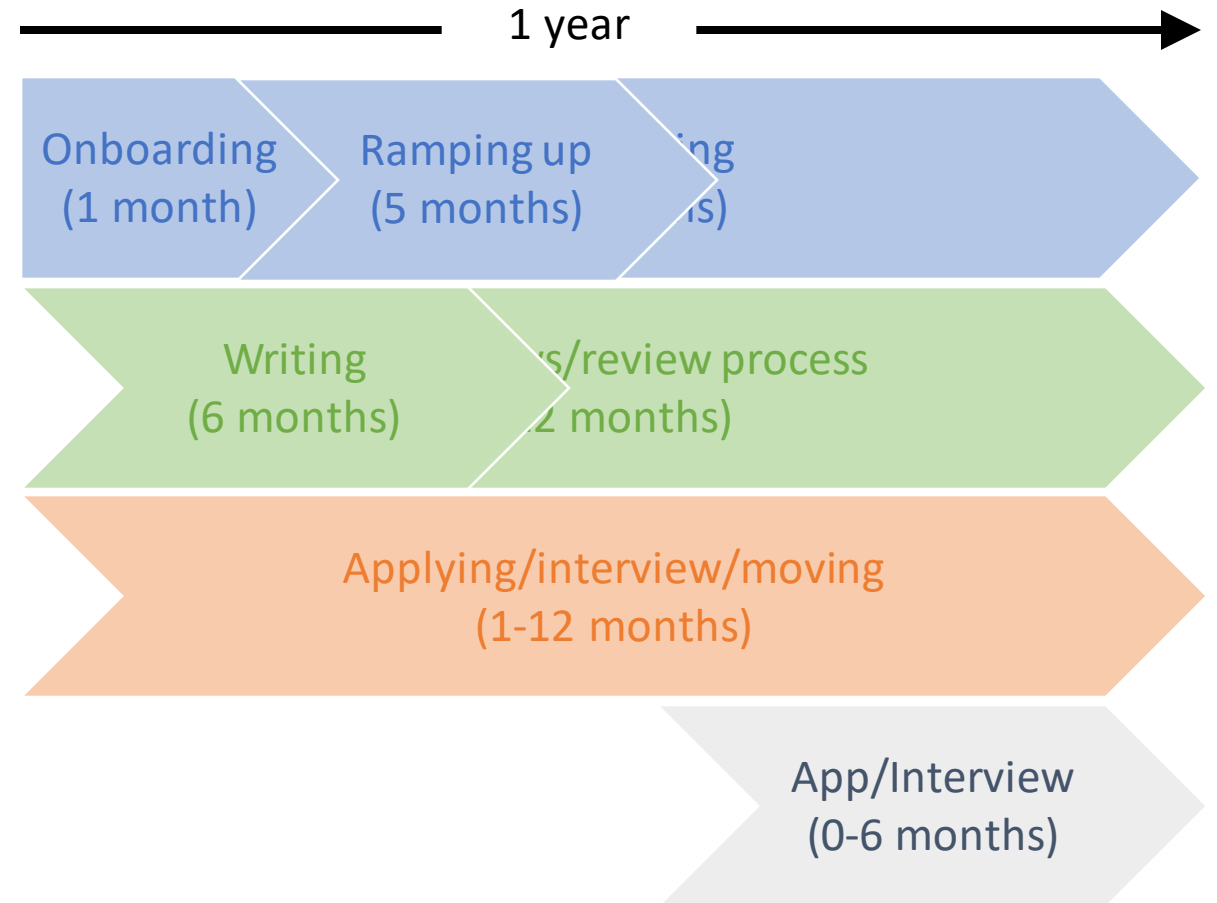
Comparison with other timescales

- **6 months***: typical time to write a first-author publication
 - A postdoc can realistically produce 3 papers in a 2-year postdoc
- **18 months**: time to write, apply, and start a Fellowship
 - Most ECRs are not sufficiently aware of the fellowship lag time
- **24 months**: minimum commitment for a “leadership role”
 - E.g., chair of a collaboration working group

Strong advantage for postdocs with longer postdocs or “fall back” options

The impossibility of a 1-year contract

- A one-year postdoc leaves zero time for science
 - Still need to onboard + ramp-up
 - Still need to apply for the next position
 - Suitable only for special cases



“Extension subject to performance”

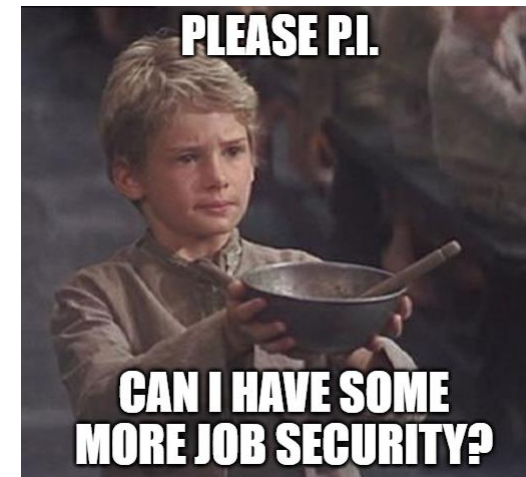
possible 1-year extension contingent upon performance.

annual extension depending on performance,

extension of 1.5 years contingent on satisfactory performance.

possibility of extension if additional external funding is secured.

to a third year based on performance.



- It is nice to offer this, but it adds a lot of uncertainty!
- Power dynamics + little oversight make these hotspots for abuse
- My advice: verbal guarantees are meaningless
- My advice: write down the exact criteria and the funding status of the extension

The benefits of short-term contracts

- Opportunity to travel and engage with the best researchers!
- Networking away from your PhD supervisor
- Experience of different (scientific) cultures and work styles
- Experience of different cultures: learn a new language!
- Job insecurity hones your skills:
 - Science is more than just research
 - Learn to attract funding and think big-picture
 - Open-ended contracts can result in research stagnation

The downsides to short-term contracts

- Need to be geographically “open minded” to ensure continued employment
 - Requires support of family/partners/children to be plausible
- Leads to frequent personal uprooting
 - Can have an impact on the ability to foster relationships (romantic and non-romantic)
- Cultural isolation
 - Living “away from home” is isolating and depressing
 - Acutely so for scientists arriving from developing countries
- Career uncertainty and family planning
- Career uncertainty and mental health

Anonymized case studies: Divya

- Postdoctoral researcher at a research-intensive University in Sweden
- First time living outside of India
- No housing support provided and no help to learn the language
- European customs and culture very different
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness

Outcome: left their postdoc early with little to show

What could have been done better?

Provide institutional support for people on short-term contracts beyond the academic setting

Anonymized case studies: Emily

- Excellent postdoc trying to obtain a position within commute distance from their partner
- Sought advice from a senior academic (at my recommendation)
- Told “Perhaps it is time to have kids?”

Outcome: Emily got a prestigious Fellowship

What could have been done better?

If you don't have supportive advice, perhaps
don't provide any!

Anonymized case studies: Clara

- Excellent final-year PhD student
- Encouraged to apply to the STFC ERF fellowship at a prestigious university
- Little support given in writing the application or explaining the process
- Clara was unsuccessful in the internal pre-selection process

Outcome: Clara had to rush for postdoc positions and wait until the next round to apply

What could have been done better?

- Don't "playing the numbers game"
- Do educate applicants about the process
- Do be realistic about their chances

Non-Anonymized Case study: Paul

- Paul is the P.I. of a research group in Australia with 8 international postdocs and students
- When COVID lockdowns started, Paul organizes a regular Zoom telecon, dropping of drinks/snacks for each of the postdocs and students

Outcome: Though far from home, Paul's research group had significant support for their mental health in a difficult period

What could have been done better?

Heroes are often examples of failed policy:
Need policy to support people on short-term contracts

Thanks for listening