

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POSTDOCTORAL STAGES

For the large majority of those that take part in the scientific community the significance of a postdoctoral stage is clear. However, for many people it is not evident. In fact, the term has not been included in the dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language (www.rae.es).

I have had the chance to verify the former when I make the comment that, at present, I am pursuing a postdoctoral stage at Harvard University. I am then asked, with surprise and with a discrete smile and a peculiar tone: “Are you still studying?” and my answer generally is: “yes and no”, for the following reasons: While a postdoctoral fellowship implies a training process and the acquisition of new knowledge and abilities in the field of the research being carried out, it is also true that during this period we work rather autonomously in major projects of our interest that stem from the training phase of our doctoral studies.

It is expected that, through the supervision of a mentor with whom there are common interests, the postdoctoral fellow reaches a higher and better scientific productivity, where his/her major contribution in the whole process of publication is recognized. It can be considered that the postdoctoral fellowship is a ‘bridge’ between a deepening in research training and an autonomous academic development with the goal of fulfilling a placement in a university or another institution, or even in a commercial enterprise.

This also demonstrates that it is not enough to reach a doctorate. Perhaps the definition of this term as “polished and full knowledge in a given subject” (www.rae.es) is now obsolete. In other times, obtaining a doctor’s degree meant the culmination of an academic career; nowadays, however, it is just the beginning.

The development of science takes place at a vertiginous rhythm. For this reason, developing countries such as many of our Latin American nations must understand that the advanced training of human capital is an imperative need

if we want to become competitive regions. This was rightly understood a long time ago by prestigious universities all around the world. For instance, the Public Health School of Harvard University, where I am a fellow at the moment, counts over 350 postdoctoral fellows working in different areas, such as social and behavioral sciences, nutrition and epidemiology, among others, with a common emphasis: public health. The University as a whole has thousands of postdoctoral fellows distributed in the different Schools and Research Centers.

This group, within the University, is of vital importance not only for the generation of knowledge through new research projects, but also for the renovation of the academic personnel.

The time lapse considered for the development of a postdoctoral fellow is approximately three years; however, in sciences such as biology, given the complexity of some of the projects, this time can be extended for up to five years. Harvard University has clearly established the responsibility of the postdoctoral fellows, as well as those of the academic mentors. The emphasis given to the person being trained in assuming the primary and main responsibility for the development of his/her academic career is of note, as also is the respect that mentors are to exhibit towards their trainee-colleague regarding their research interests and the recognition of the work contributed by the fellow. This aspect includes the authorship of the publications, promoting at all times a strict ethical behavior, not only in the sphere of research, but in all aspects pertaining to the professional development of the fellow. Undoubtedly, the latter is the essence of what mentors hand down to us.

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