

CASCA Postdoc Committee Report

30th April 2021 - 1st December 2021

Membership

1. Tyrone Woods (Chair)
 2. Sam Lawler (Vice-Chair)
 3. Leo Alcorn (voting member)
 4. Toby Brown (voting member)
 5. Ismaël Moumen (voting member)
 6. Josh Speagle (voting member)
 7. Locke Spencer (voting member)
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Activities during reporting period

Activities at CASCA2021

The CASCA Postdoc Committee at the time of the CASCA 2021 annual meeting was an ad-hoc committee, created on a provisional basis in response to Recommendation 81 of the LRP2020. We presented a poster at CASCA2021 outlining our actions within the first several months of our efforts, including the publication of a statement on the impact of COVID-19 on Postdoctoral fellows, the organization of a national seminar series for postdocs (CanVAS, see below), and a call to action including soliciting self-nominations to join the Postdoc committee, subject to review by current members and the CASCA Board.

The Postdoc committee also coordinated several open-door virtual meetings during coffee and lunch breaks throughout the conference, providing an opportunity to speak with interested CASCA members directly about our existing and planned efforts. During the AGM session, the CASCA Postdoc Committee was elevated to a full standing committee.

CanVAS Talks For Canadian ECRs

Our guidance of the monthly Canadian Virtual Astronomy Seminar (CanVAS) series has been very successful, providing a national platform for postdoctoral fellows working in Canada and

Canadian postdocs abroad to showcase their high-impact science. The average attendance has continued to grow since our previous report, with the majority of seminars drawing audience numbers in the low-to-mid 30s.

In the coming year, we hope to expand this further with more targeted advertising by email on an institution by institution basis, leveraging the geographic breadth of our committee's membership. Since April 30 2021, we have held 6 CanVAS seminars, all of which have been recorded and are available via YouTube links with descriptions on the Postdoc Committee page of the CASCA website (https://casca.ca/?page_id=14828). We are currently planning the Winter/Spring session of the CanVAS series, and will finalize the schedule at our next meeting.

Postdoc Survey (in collaboration with EIC)

The committee is well ahead in preparations to carry out a "census" of Canadian Astronomy's postdoctoral community. In particular, we have prepared a detailed and carefully considered list of questions in two parts: the first part addresses workplace environment, benefits and opportunities, while the second part addresses demographics. The latter is adapted from the survey employed with great success at the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Science, which they developed with extensive consultation and in alignment with UBC's Employment Equity Survey. This was very kindly provided by Prof. Ninan Abraham, along with notes and guidelines for conducting such surveys in accordance with Canadian privacy law.

After consultation with the Equity and Inclusivity Committee Chair Kristine Spekkens, we have agreed to carry out our survey in parallel with the larger planned CASCA-wide survey rather than merging them. This is essential for several reasons, most particularly:

- 1) Unlike the planned CASCA survey, the scope of our postdoctoral survey will include many non-CASCA members. We believe this is vital in order to obtain a meaningful picture of the postdoctoral community in Canada, a necessarily transient subset of the population who are often least connected with the wider CASCA community and its resources.
- 2) We will be carrying out a highly targeted survey, employing a combination of incentives (e.g., inclusion in a national registry for postdoc seminar invitations), a highly focussed email campaign, and local contacts identified at institutions across the country, with the goal of obtaining a much greater completeness than achieved in similar CASCA surveys in the past.
- 3) By combining our workplace conditions and demographics questions into a single survey, we have the opportunity to identify (while preserving anonymity) any systemic issues which may exist in a way that would not be possible with a broader survey.

Moreover, the postdoctoral career stage represents a uniquely critical junction in the faculty pipeline, for which national-level data is at present noticeably absent.

Our planned survey questions have been submitted to CASCA Board and given conditional approval, pending the consistent inclusion of a “Decline to Answer” option, the development of an opening statement carefully explaining the intended use and future availability and format of the collected data, and the selection of a survey platform which can preserve anonymity and carry out the survey in accordance with Canadian privacy laws and with proper ethics approval for future publication. These conditions are being accommodated now, partially in collaboration with the Equity and Inclusion Committee; in particular, together we are presently seeking out a University partner who can access local resources for survey planning, ethics approval, and rollout.

Postdoc Hiring Guidelines & LRP2020 Recommendations (with LCRIC)

Many of the recommendations of CASCA’s Long Range Plan 2020 pertain explicitly to Postdoctoral scientists, in particular recommendations 69, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, and 89. Representatives from the CASCA Postdoc Committee (T. Woods, S. Lawler, and T. Brown) recently met virtually with LCRIC to discuss the role Canadian Postdocs can play in this process. In particular, LCRIC endorsed our plan to carry out a separate workplace conditions and demographics survey focussed exclusively on postdoctoral scientists working in astronomy and astrophysics. As part of this process, we will naturally also begin to build up a database of Canadian postdocs using an opt-in sign-up circulated with our survey (and which must be stored separately from the data we will be collecting). This will provide a crucial step towards fulfilling Recommendation 89 within the LRP 2020.

Further, we agreed that the CASCA committee would provide a draft document outlining best-practice guidelines for postdoctoral recruitment and flexible employment, in accordance with Recommendation 83 and incorporating many of the other recommendations given in the LRP, and developed iteratively with LCRIC and CASCA Board as needed. We anticipate these guidelines would include a number of recommendations such as:

1. Recommending the standardization of offers of part-time employment as an option after initial hiring, as well as hybrid or remote work where feasible
2. Where relocation is required to take up an offer of employment, recommending that reasonable funds must be made available, in advance if needed, in order to provide for associated costs. A reasonable template for the extent of these expenses would be the Initial Appointees Relocation Cost Guidelines for federal government employees

3. Recommending that those not offered positions always receive rejection letters once a decision has been made, and that interviewees who are turned down receive constructive rejection letters.
4. Recommending that in the future, anticipated salary ranges be made explicit in all job ads

Finally, while CASCA may have limited resources to provide additional training opportunities to Canadian Postdocs on a national scale, we agreed that more could be done on this front, including collecting and distributing links to relevant available resources.

Further Updates

- Tyrone Woods has taken on the role of Chair, and Sam Lawler Vice-Chair
- Following an open call and careful consideration of candidates by the Postdoc Committee, we have admitted two new voting members: Leo Alcorn and Josh Speagle
- Additionally, a graduate student, Ameet Sidhu, will be joining us as an observer
- The committee continues to meet once a month and regularly interacts via email and Slack in order to coordinate all of these efforts
- Following our promotion to a full standing committee at this year's AGM, our Terms of Reference have been updated accordingly on the CASCA website