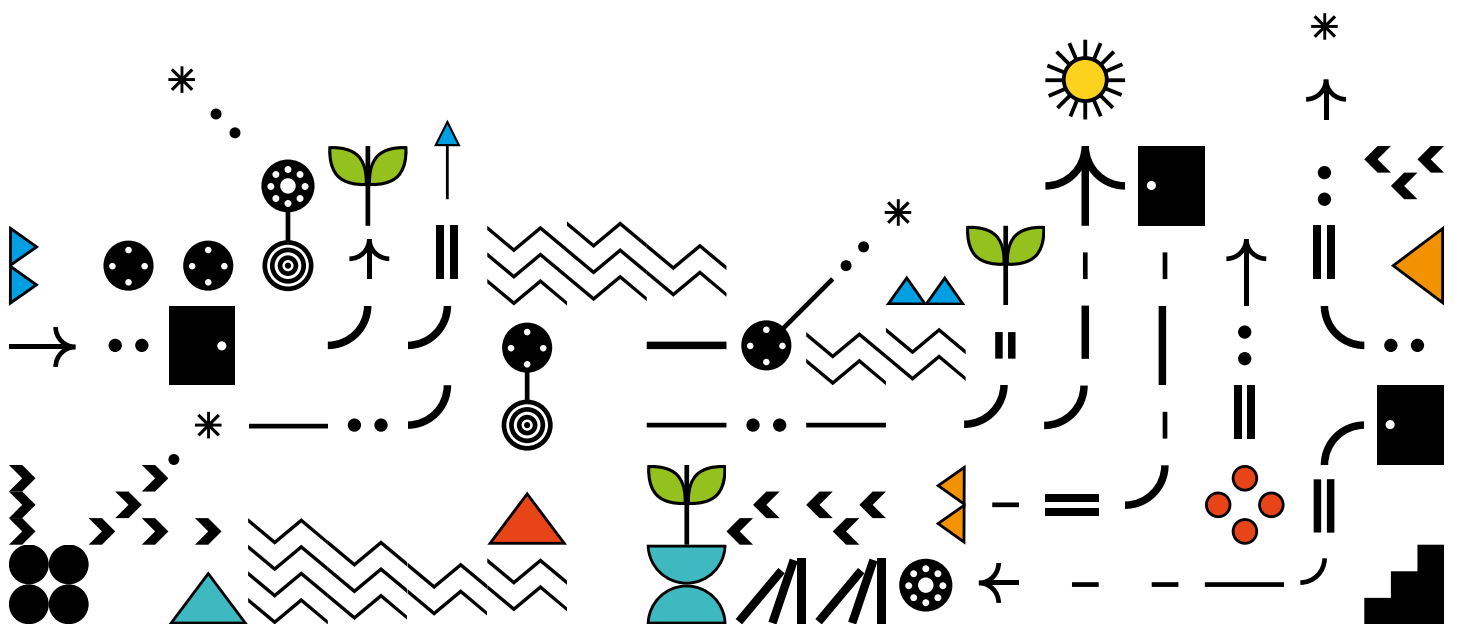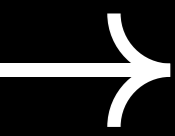# Prosper.

Prosper:
A New Model
for Postdoc Career
Development

February 2023

"Postdocs are some of the most able, committed and talented individuals you'll find in today's workplace. But too often they lack an appreciation of how skilled they truly are, and the extent to which time spent as a postdoc represents a fantastic investment for the future – one that can open all sorts of doors.
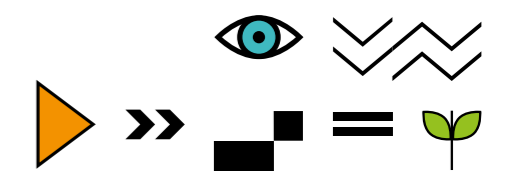
In relation to this, the findings from the first Prosper pilot are hugely encouraging. It goes to show just how much of a difference it can make when postdocs are given the support they need to take control of their careers."

Anthony Hollander,
Pro-Vice-Chancellor for
Research & Impact at
The University of Liverpool

What is Prosper?

Prosper is creating a new, holistic model for postdoc career development in the UK – one that unlocks postdocs' potential to thrive across multiple career pathways, both within and beyond academia.

Launched in 2019 with a £3.6 million grant from Research England, Prosper's objective is nothing less than a transformation of research culture – to pioneer an approach that empowers postdocs to take full control of their careers, and open up the huge talent pool that the UK's postdoc community represents, to the benefit of all.

From the outset, Prosper built its offering around three core pillars:

CO-CREATION WITH EMPLOYERS –

Providing postdocs with real-world insight from over 100 employers across 12 career clusters, equipping them to thrive across a wide range of career options within and beyond academia
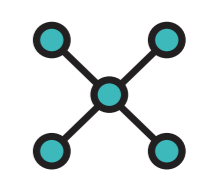
DEMOCRATISATION OF ACCESS –

Overcoming barriers to meet the needs of all postdocs, regardless of background or discipline. To reflect the true diversity of the UK's postdoc community
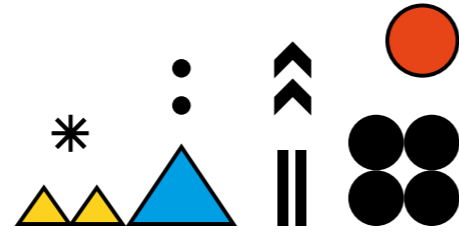
RECOGNISING THE ROLE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS –

Empowering PIs to play a critical role in nurturing the career development of their postdoctoral researchers

The First Cohort

The first Prosper pilot represents the co-creation, refining and initial testing of this new approach. In March 2021, 53 postdocs across a range of disciplines from The University of Liverpool were selected to join the first Prosper cohort.

The aim was to create an active and diverse community that would embark on a career development journey both together and as individuals. Over the course of a year, members of the cohort had access to a variety of resources, sessions and workshops, designed to meet their career development needs as a whole and broadly structured to progress through three complementary, interlinked areas:
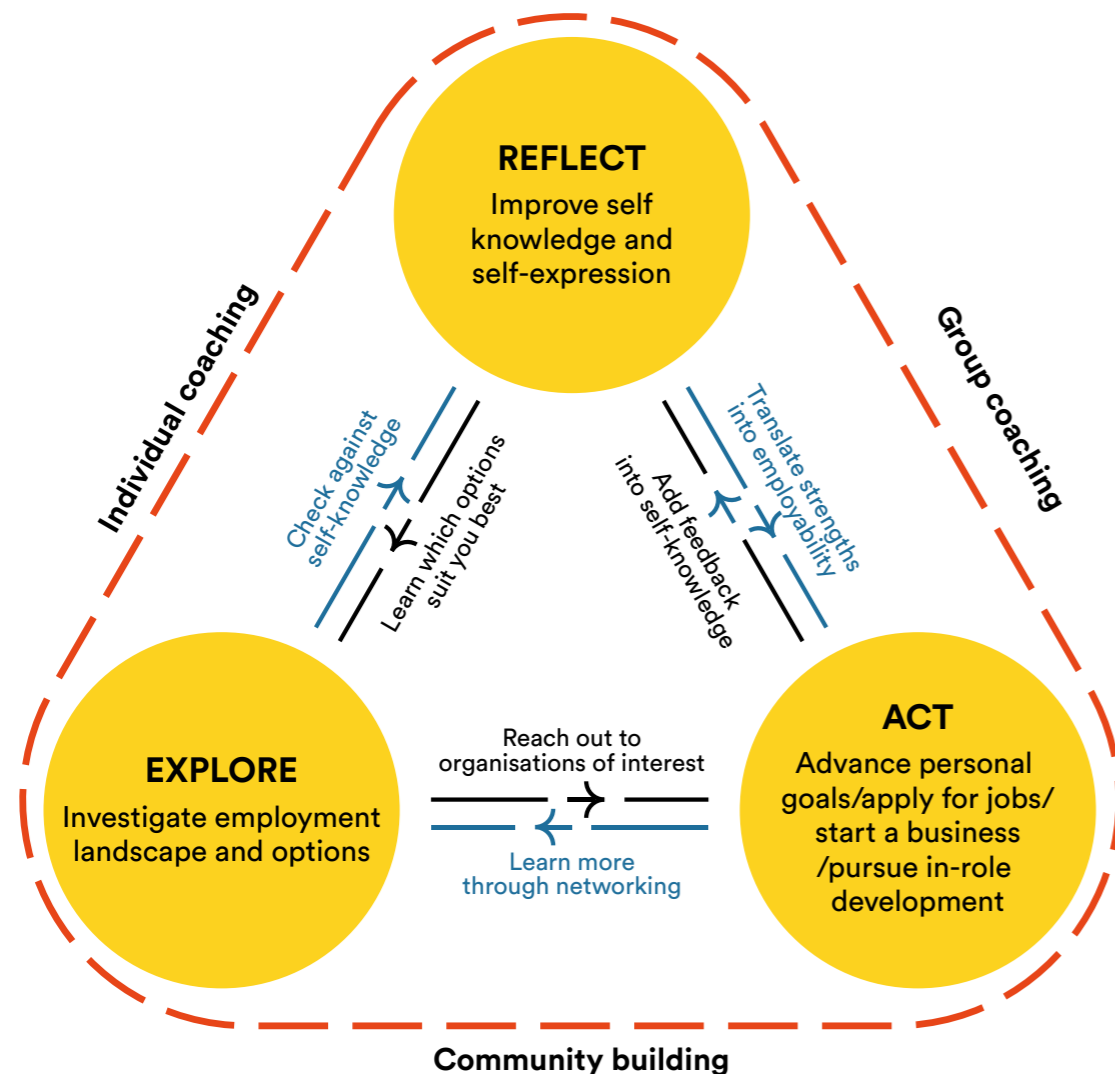
REFLECT:
Guided self-reflection designed to enable postdocs to take stock of their own personal career situation, and to identify their strengths, skills, values, preferences and long-term goals.

"Self-reflection helped me to know myself better – what I really enjoy and value. I realised that just because I can do a job, doesn't mean I have to. Understanding this was game changing.

– Alessandra Frau
Cohort 1 postdoc

EXPLORE:
Turning the gaze outward to explore the wider world beyond academia, and learn about the plethora of opportunities and career pathways out there. Co-created with over 100 employers across 12 'career clusters'.

"Prosper was fantastic for developing my thinking about where and how to direct my attention in terms of future career progression.

– Caroline Redhead
Cohort 1 postdoc

ACT:
Putting broad insights into concrete practice – equipping participants with the practical skills necessary to effectively build their professional networks and pursue job opportunities.

"Prosper was a great help in getting me to structure my CV for a non-academic job – I became much more mindful of my transferable skills and how to tailor these to the opportunity at hand.

– Anthony Evans
Cohort 1 postdoc

Throughout the year these resources were supported by professional career coaching – members were given 15 hours group coaching in groups no larger than 11, and 3.5 hours of individual coaching. Participants also engaged in community building activities as a cohort throughout the year, culminating in an end of year celebration in April 2022.

COACHING AND COMMUNITY:
Encouraging postdocs to connect with each other as postdocs, to engage with career development as a group and share their reflections, learnings and experiences – with professional support.

"The chance to meet fellow postdocs, and sense of camaraderie and security these sessions provided, really helped motivate me and reduce apprehension about my own career journey.

– Andrew Duckworth
Cohort 1 postdoc

Impact
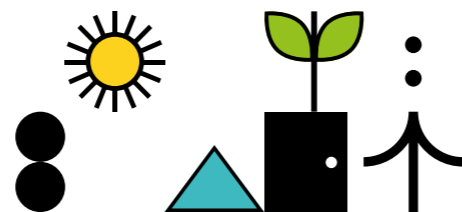
To evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot, Prosper tracked a range of metrics throughout the year and in the months following. Though the full impact in terms of career trajectories will take longer to fully manifest, we believe the initial findings demonstrate a marked – and positive – impact on attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes.

Confidence and attitudes

One of Prosper's core aims, above and beyond facilitating career outcomes, is to engender a change in postdocs' mindsets regarding how they think about themselves and the professional pathways open to them.

The goal is to enable postdocs to take control of their future, and switch from a passive and uncertain mindset to one characterised by pro-activity and clarity.
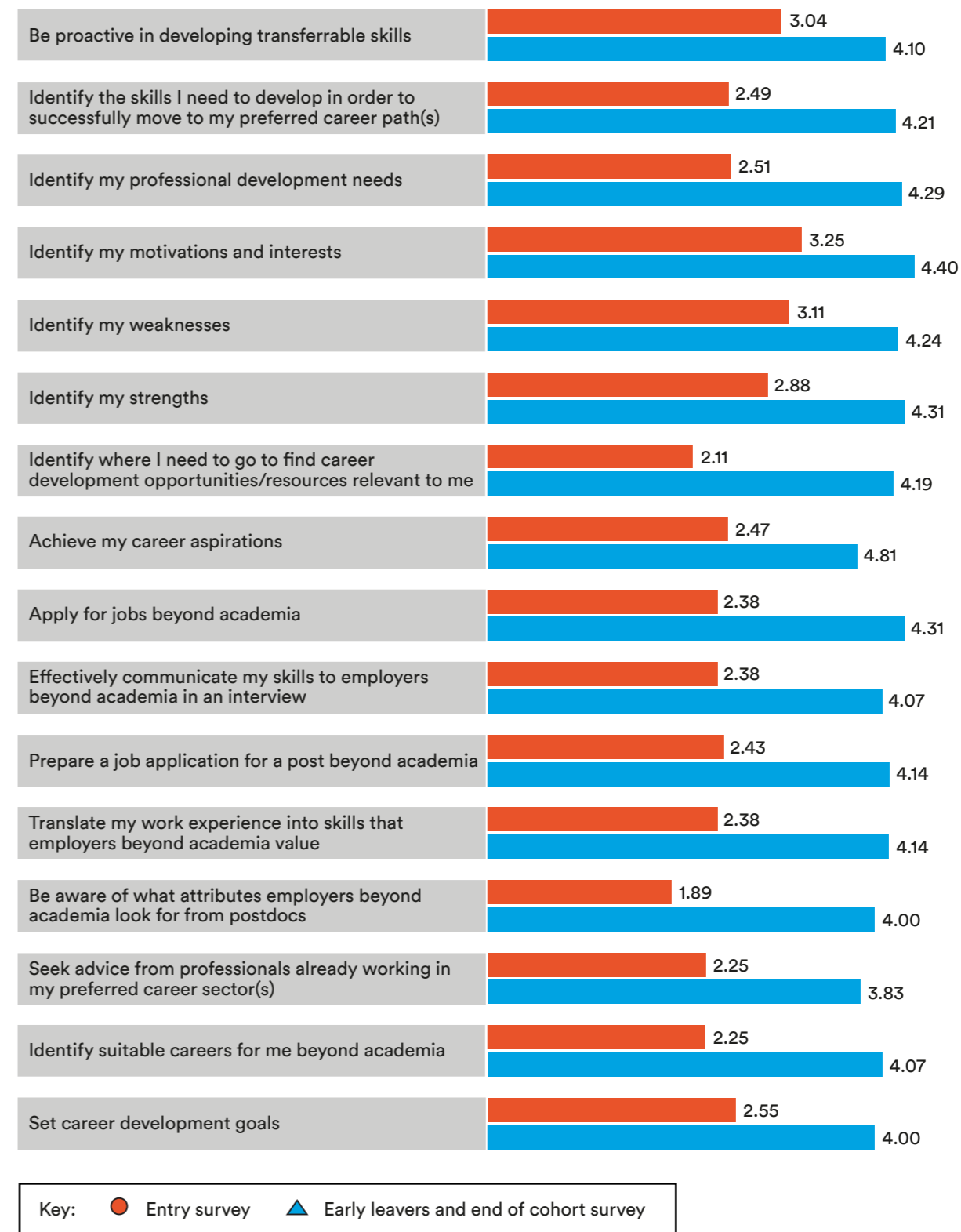
> " Prosper was crucial to gaining confidence in transitioning beyond academia and shaping my profile to develop my career in the direction I want.
>
> – Marcos Del Cueto
>   Cohort 1 postdoc "

> " I felt very supported by Prosper – it was like I was building myself up again from scratch. It gave me back the confidence I'd lost. I was able to find more time to do the things that I enjoy and in doing so felt happier and more motivated to tackle career issues.
>
> – Zohra Butt
>   Cohort 1 postdoc "

> " Through Prosper I've become more ambitious. I've a much stronger appreciation of the importance and uses of communication and interpersonal skillsets – I no longer just see myself as a repository of technical ability.
>
> – David Ashmore
>   Cohort 1 postdoc "

The pilot had a significant impact on participants' confidence across 16 areas related to career development, measured on a five-point Likert scale score:

Changes in confidence

Area	Entry survey	Early leavers and end of cohort survey
Be proactive in developing transferrable skills	3.04	4.10
Identify the skills I need to develop in order to successfully move to my preferred career path(s)	2.49	4.21
Identify my professional development needs	2.51	4.29
Identify my motivations and interests	3.25	4.40
Identify my weaknesses	3.11	4.24
Identify my strengths	2.88	4.31
Identify where I need to go to find career development opportunities/resources relevant to me	2.11	4.19
Achieve my career aspirations	2.47	4.81
Apply for jobs beyond academia	2.38	4.31
Effectively communicate my skills to employers beyond academia in an interview	2.38	4.07
Prepare a job application for a post beyond academia	2.43	4.14
Translate my work experience into skills that employers beyond academia value	2.38	4.14
Be aware of what attributes employers beyond academia look for from postdocs	1.89	4.00
Seek advice from professionals already working in my preferred career sector(s)	2.25	3.83
Identify suitable careers for me beyond academia	2.25	4.07
Set career development goals	2.55	4.00

Key: ● Entry survey   ▲ Early leavers and end of cohort survey
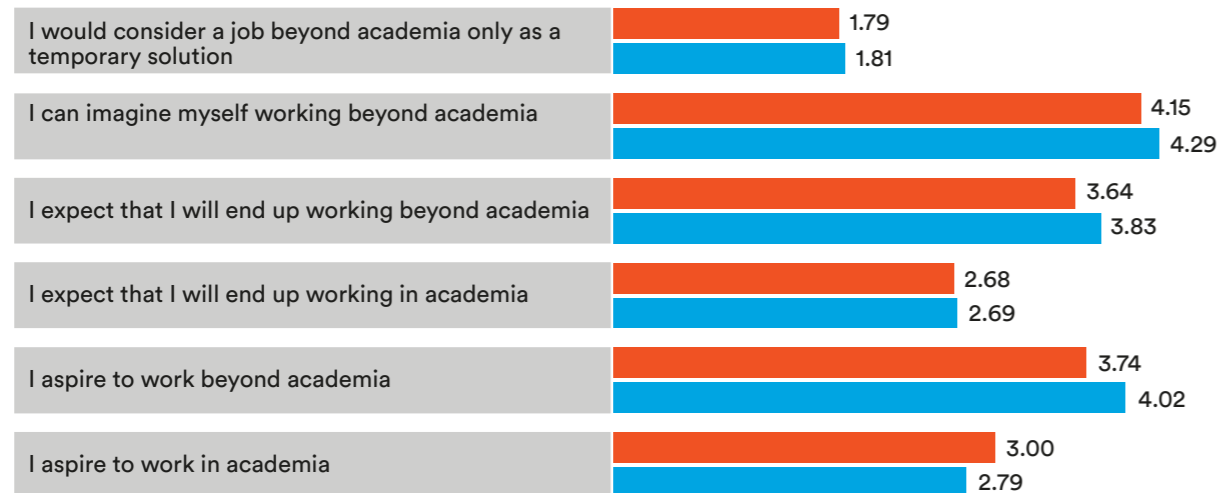
Participants showed significant growth in their abilities to reflect on their personal self, transform their skills to meet what employers beyond academia are looking for, identify opportunities beyond academia, and develop job applications. The most impressive leap was in the area of identifying opportunities beyond academia – with confidence in developing job applications close behind.

Perceptions

Prosper also aimed to transform perceptions about the breadth of career options open to postdocs. We saw an increase in the extent to which participants could imagine themselves working beyond academia, as well as in terms of concrete aspirations to do so.

Changes in Perceptions

Statement	Entry survey	Early leavers and end of cohort survey
I would consider a job beyond academia only as a temporary solution	1.79	1.81
I can imagine myself working beyond academia	4.15	4.29
I expect that I will end up working beyond academia	3.64	3.83
I expect that I will end up working in academia	2.68	2.69
I aspire to work beyond academia	3.74	4.02
I aspire to work in academia	3.00	2.79

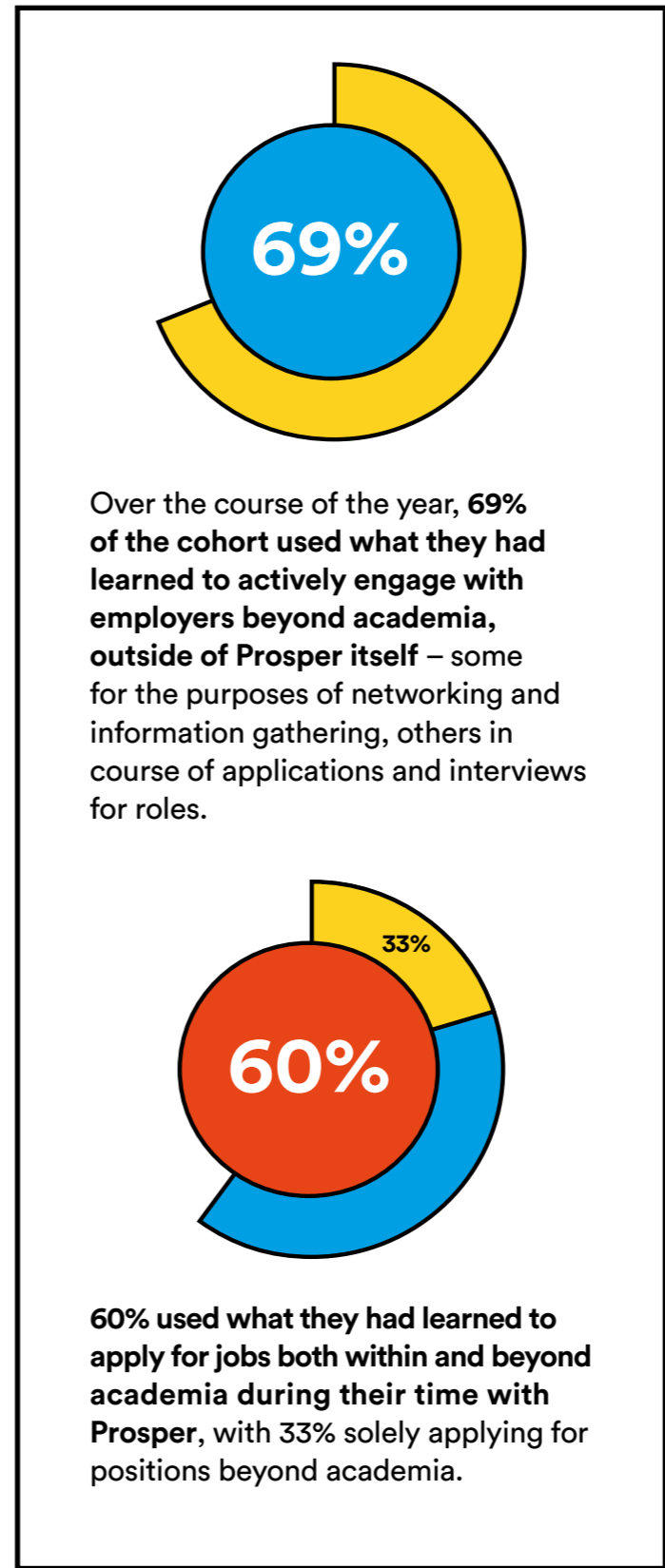Key: ● Entry survey ▲ Early leavers and end of cohort survey

> " I started Prosper with a very limited idea of what options were available to someone with my skill set. I still really enjoy working in academia, but am now far less fearful of looking for opportunities elsewhere as I know I have a very attractive skill set.
>
> **– Blanca Perez-Sepulveda**
> Cohort 1 postdoc "

> " I have learned so much about myself – I'm now quite seriously exploring some career options that I would not have had the confidence to pursue a year ago.
>
> **– Dominic Chiwenga**
> Cohort 1 postdoc "

> " I feel much more confident in one day pursuing a career outside of academia since engaging with Prosper, and have gained valuable skills and tools to help prepare myself for the non-academic job market.
>
> **– Lisa Luu**
> Cohort 1 postdoc "

Behaviour

These shifts in confidence and perception additionally translated to notable shifts in behaviour related to career moves and job applications.

69%

Over the course of the year, **69% of the cohort used what they had learned to actively engage with employers beyond academia, outside of Prosper itself** – some for the purposes of networking and information gathering, others in course of applications and interviews for roles.

60% **33%**

60% used what they had learned to apply for jobs both within and beyond academia during their time with **Prosper,** with 33% solely applying for positions beyond academia.

> " To say Prosper played an important role in helping me to secure my new position would be an understatement – I was approached for the position on LinkedIn... it was only thanks to Prosper that I even thought to make a LinkedIn profile.
>
> **– Alex James**
> Cohort 1 postdoc "

> " Prosper really helped me understand the extent to which persistence is the key to success – get in contact with recruiters on LinkedIn, be bold about what you apply for, keep going until you find the role that matches both your essential and desirable criteria.
>
> **– Priyanka Raina**
> Cohort 1 postdoc "
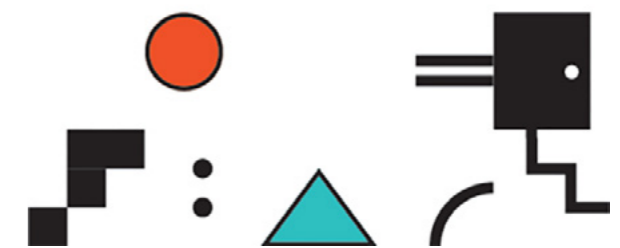
Outcomes

Perhaps the strongest indication of Prosper's impact can be seen in the fact that, at the time of writing, **almost half of the first cohort (26 out of 53)** have been able to use what they learned to secure new positions both within and beyond academia.
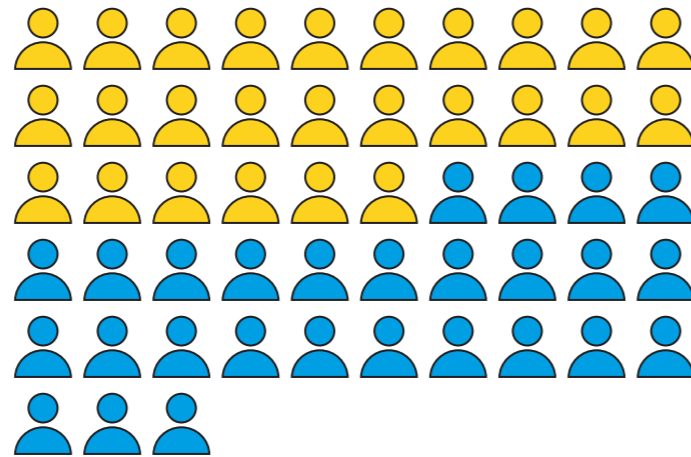
16 (over 30% of the cohort) successfully made the leap into career pathways beyond academia – securing roles at a variety of organisations, including the Met Office, the European Commission, software companies, pharmaceutical companies, and a handful of promising start-ups.
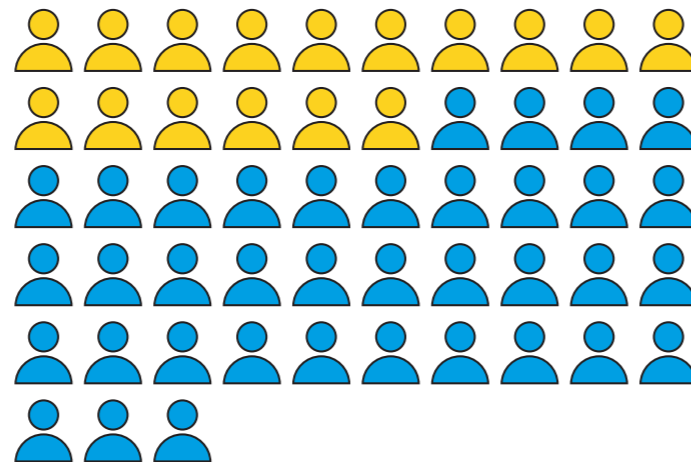
The range of roles secured is testament to the richness of talent and skill in our postdoc community, and how attractive postdocs can be as candidates to all manner of organisations.

> " Prosper changed my working life! I joined with an idea of what career I wanted in the long-term, but not how to get there. Prosper was a great help in preparing applications and searching for my next position – I felt like I had everything I needed to be successful.
>
> – Egidijus Kustas
> Cohort 1 postdoc "

> " Prior to joining Prosper I felt so lost in my career. Unsure what to do next, and not having the confidence to take the next step or any sense of what that step might be. Prosper equipped me with the knowledge and tools I needed to change direction and to aim higher in my job search.
>
> – Zohra Butt
> Cohort 1 postdoc "

Destinations beyond academia

ZOHRA BUTT
Medical Science Liaison
From: Institute of Integrative Systems, Molecular and Integrative Biology To: Medical Science Liaison at Pierre Fabre

MARCOS DEL CUETO
Senior Data Scientist
From: Department of Chemistry
To: Senior Data Scientist at Dataseat

ALEX JAMES
Product Development Scientist
From: School of Physical Sciences
To: Product Development Scientist at Puraffinity

PRIYANKA RAINA
Senior Data Scientist
From: Institute of Life Course and Medical Sciences
To: Senior Data Scientist at MOSAIC TX

ANDREW DUCKWORTH
Analytical Scientist
From: Institute of Life Course and Medical Sciences
To: Analytical Scientist at Pharmaron

KHURRAM AMJAD
Materials Engineer
From: School of Engineering
To: Materials Engineer at UK Atomic Energy Authority

ANTHONY EVANS
Data Scientist for the Computational Biology Facility
From: Institute of Integrative Systems, Molecular and Integrative Biology To: Data Scientist at the Computational Biological Facility, University of Liverpool

ALESSANDRA FRAU
Senior Public Engagement Officer
From: Institute of Integrative Systems, Molecular and Integrative Biology To: Senior Public Engagement Officer, University of Central Lancashire

LORNA YOUNG
Started new Life Coaching business
From: Institute of Life Course and Medical Sciences
To: Started new Life Coaching business

DAVID ASHMORE
Scientist
From: School of Environmental Sciences
To: Remote Sensing Scientist at The Met Office

KYLE DOCHERTY
Senior Analytical Scientist
From: Department of Eye and Vision Science
To: Senior Analytical Scientist at Ipsen

LINDA D'AMORE
Started new consultancy business
From: Institute of Infection, Veterinary and Ecological Sciences
To: Started new consultancy business, Third Wave Analytics

EGIDIJUS KUKSTAS
Data Scientist
From: Department of Physics
To: Data Scientist at INRIX

RACHAEL WRIGHT
Centre Manager
From: Department of Women's and Children's Health
To: Centre Manager at CIMA, University of Liverpool

LISA CAVALERIE
International Aid & Co-operation Policy Officer
From: Institute of Infection, Veterinary and Ecological Sciences
To: International Aid & Co-operation Policy Officer at the European Commission

GABRIELLA MELIS
Senior Intelligence Analyst at NHS Digital
From: Institute of Population Health
To: Senior Intelligence Analyst at NHS Digital

Where next?

We have since completed our second pilot, involving a larger cohort of 75 postdocs, drawn from the University of Liverpool, the University of Manchester and Lancaster University – with participants carefully selected to ensure a diversity that represents the wider UK postdoc community.
The results from the evaluation of this cohort will be available soon.

All of this is in service of creating the final Prosper model, which – along with an associated online portal – will be launched nationwide in the summer of 2023. This will draw together all of the outputs from our two pilot cohorts, alongside our work with employers and Principal Investigators. In addition to resources for postdocs and Principal Investigators, the final offering will include additional materials and guidance for Higher Education institutions, designed to enable organisations to use Prosper in a flexible way, according to their varying needs and internal resources. The contents will be freely available to all.

Contact

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@ProsperPostdoc

www.liverpool.ac.uk/researcher/prosper

linkedin.com/company/prosperproject

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