

# Exploring the use of *Résumé* for Research and Innovation Narrative CVs in live postdoc recruitments

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## Abstract

It has been suggested Narrative CVs (NCVs) will increase recruitment of underrepresented groups and give more weight to wider contributions of academic researchers, though no empirical evidence exists on whether they achieve this. In a randomised controlled trial of five postdoctoral recruitments at the University of Cambridge, candidates were asked to submit a cover letter, Standard CV (SCV) and NCV. Panel members ranked candidates based on their cover letter and either their SCV or NCV. Then, panel members saw the full applications, ranked candidates again, and the recruitment continued as usual. Afterwards, we interviewed panel members and candidates about their experiences. While NCVs allow detailing wider contributions, they may be less suitable for early career recruitments. NCVs may introduce bias around language, writing- and self-presentation skills. Additional guidance and familiarity with NCV formats may increase potential benefits of their use in academic recruitment.

## 1. Introduction

Improving research culture at higher education institutions is a concern of policymakers worldwide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2021). A positive research culture is increasingly seen as a prerequisite for good science and leadership in research and innovation (Gottlieb et al., 2021). Research culture will feature in the UK's upcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF), further cementing its importance.

Policy makers and universities have identified a set of sector-wide issues concerning current research culture (Gottlieb et al., 2021; Universities UK, 2019; Vitae, 2019; Wellcome Trust, 2020a, 2020b), including workload concerns, career insecurity, and the need for a diverse workforce. Among the proposed actions in the UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI, the UK's primary government research funder) People and Teams Action Plan (UKRI, 2023a) is an increasing reliance on narrative approaches for recruitment and promotion processes. One goal is to support non-linear career paths, fostering a diverse and inclusive research community.

How academic staff are recruited at higher education institutions determines the diversity of researchers in the academic system. Typically, candidates are assessed based on a covering letter and a curriculum vitae (CV). The covering letter allows a candidate to explain their motivation and suitability for the job. The CV lists the candidate’s education and research experience, their degrees, grants, and publications. Such metrics are widely used in research management and assessment, for example for screening large numbers of applications (Reymert, 2021). However, these quantitative measures may not always capture the quality and impact of the research the candidate has (or will) produce (Aksnes et al., 2019; Kun, 2018; Stengers, 2018; Wilsdon et al., 2015).

Various Narrative CV (NCV) formats have been suggested to address these challenges. In a recent report, UKRI promoted The Résumé for Research and Innovation (R4RI) for funding calls ‘to capture the outputs of those not on a standard academic career pathway’ (UKRI, 2023a, p. 32, 2024). The R4RI NCV was originally created for grant applications (UKRI, 2024). It includes questions about a candidate’s contributions to the generation of research output, the development of others, the wider research community, and wider society (**Figure 1**). UKRI suggests that its use could also improve recruitment and promotion (UKRI, 2023c), enabling ‘people and teams to evidence a wider range of skills and experience than a traditional academic CV’ (UKRI, 2023b). However, little is known about the effect of using NCVs in recruitments. Previous work has studied the use of NCVs in funding applications (Meadmore et al., 2022) and hypothetical recruitment contexts (Adams, 2021), but there have been no empirical studies of live academic recruitments to address this.

**Figure 1:** R4RI Narrative CV template.

The figure shows a template for the R4RI Narrative CV. It is enclosed in a double-line border. At the top left is the UKRI logo (UK over RI) and the text 'UK Research and Innovation'. Below this are four modules, each with a title and a corresponding empty rectangular box for text entry:

- Module 1 – Contributions to the generation of new ideas, tools, methodologies or knowledge**
- Module 2 – The development of others and maintenance of effective working relationships**
- Module 3 – Contributions to the wider research and innovation community**
- Module 4 – Contributions to broader research/innovation-users and audiences and towards wider societal benefit**

This study explores the impact of the R4RI NCV template relative to the Standard CV format in live recruitments of postdoctoral positions at the University of Cambridge. The results are based on the pilot phase of a larger scale randomised controlled trial (RCT) testing the effect of CV format on panel members' ranking and shortlisting of candidates. Through interviews, we explored how the use of the NCV format, relative to the SCV format, changes panel members' (including the principal investigator, PI) and candidates' experience of the recruitment process. These emerging insights aim to inform further discussion around the benefits and challenges of NCVs.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were  $N = 64$  candidates and  $N = 17$  panel members from five postdoc recruitments (generally titled 'Research Associate' at Grade 7) at the University of Cambridge with advertisements open between March and August 2023 (**Table 1**). Of 64 candidates who consented, 25 submitted an NCV. All 17 panel members consented to participate in the study but only 15 complied with the instructions and were included in this study.

**Table 1.** Number of participants across recruitments studied.

Recruit-ment	School	Number of panel members	Number of candidates	Number of candidates who submitted NCV	Number of candidates who consented	Number of candidates who consented and submitted NCV	Number of candidates who consented, submitted NCV, and got ranked
01	Clinical Medicine	4	22	7	9	6	6
02	Physical Sciences	3	56	15	26	10	4
03	Biological Sciences	2*	31	4	15	3	3
04	Physical Sciences	3	25	8	9	5	3
05	Physical Sciences	5*	14	2	5	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>17</b>

\* In each of these recruitments, one panel member did not comply with our instructions to complete the ranking without consulting other panel members.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve candidates and twelve panel members after recruitments had been completed (**Table 2**). As we are interested in changes in who is recruited, we focussed candidate interviews on those who were placed among the ranked candidates (generally top 10-12).

**Table 2.** Number of interviewees by participant type and recruitment.

<b>Recruitment number</b>	<b>Panel member interviews</b>	<b>Candidate interviews</b>
01	2	2
02	3	6
03	1	1
04	2	1
05	4	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>

Candidates who consented received personalised feedback on their application from an experienced careers consultant in our team (KM). Panel members were not offered any incentives for participation. The PI leading the recruitment arranged the panel and requested panel members' participation.

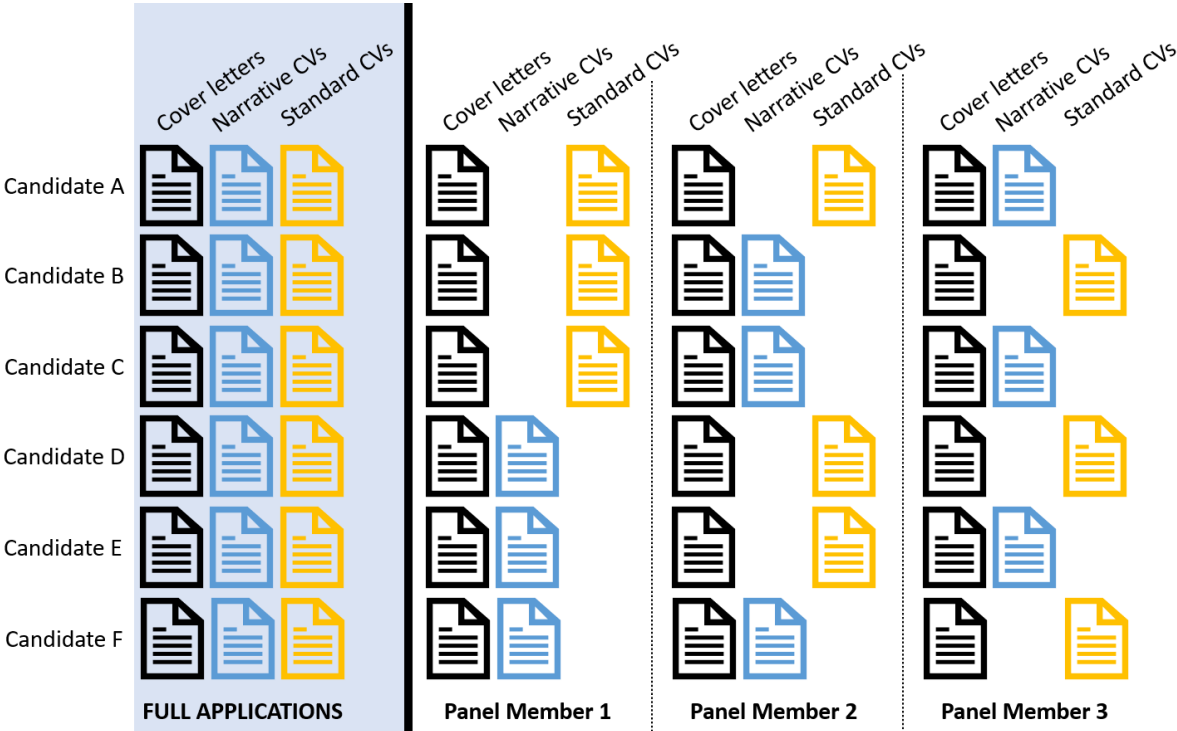
The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was provided by the Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee, Application PRE.2022.071.

### *2.2. Procedure*

The job advertisement and 'Further Particulars' document asked all candidates to submit a Narrative CV, in addition to a cover letter and an SCV. Additional information about the study and instructions on how to write an NCV were included in the Further Particulars. Some candidates supplied additional information, and some candidates did not submit all the information requested.

From these applications, individualised packs were prepared for panel members' initial assessment. These packs contained only one type of CV alongside the other application materials submitted, randomly assigned for each candidate and panel member in a pseudo-factorial manner (**Figure 2**). Each panel member individually ranked the candidates (more candidates than would be invited to interview, but excluding those who were not appointable). Once initial rankings were completed, panel members were asked to individually rank candidates again based on application packs containing both CVs. After the second ranking was received from all panel members, the panel was allowed to convene, and the recruitment proceeded as normal. With this procedure, which we had developed through consultations with employees from the university, we intended to reproduce a normal recruitment procedure, while being able to collect panel members' assessments of candidates.

**Figure 2:** Example of randomisation for initial ranking, personalised for each panel member.

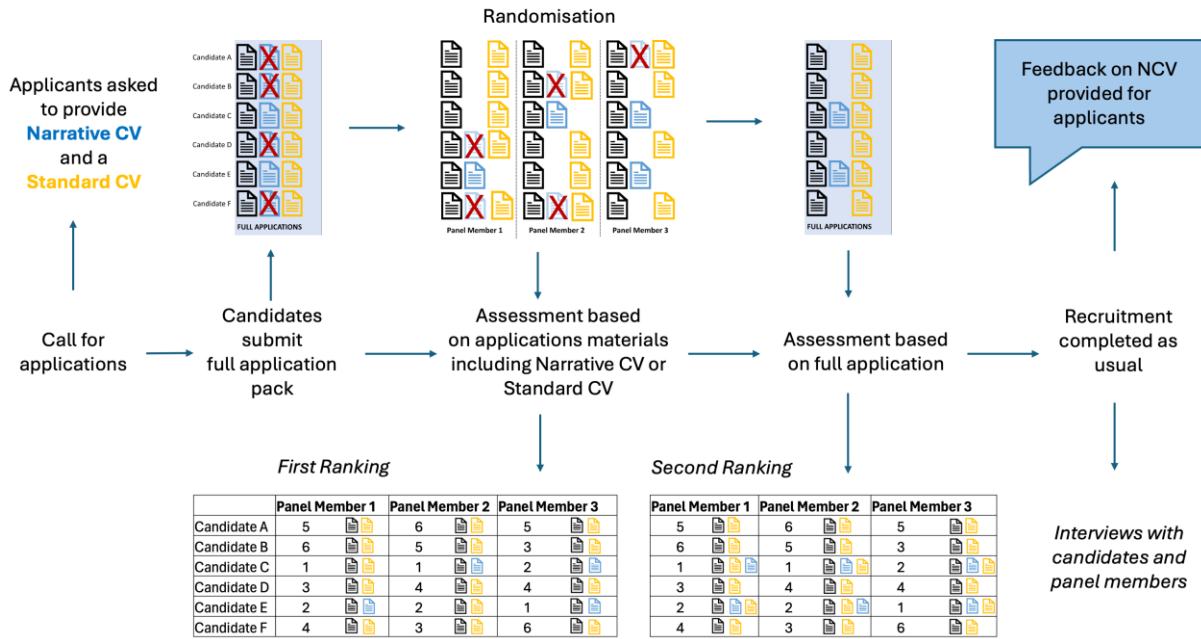


We conducted 30-minute semi-structured interviews with consenting candidates and panel members after the appointed candidate had accepted the job offer.

A visual summary of the entire procedure is shown in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3:** Visual summary of the study protocol.

Core study procedure is described in the centre. The top section depicts documents panel members see at each stage of the experiment. Red X's represent instances where applicants did not submit NCV. These documents are faded out in the randomisation phase to demonstrate how missing documents affected pack splitting. The bottom section shows the data generated in the experiment, consisting of rankings and semi-structured interviews.



### 2.3. Analysis

We collected data rich in both qualitative and quantitative aspects in this pilot study. However, the quantitative methods and results fall out of the scope of the current paper and will be presented elsewhere. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using Descript (Descript, Inc., 2024, versions current between May and December 2023). Interviewers cleaned and pseudonymised transcripts following transcription guidelines. Qualitative analysis of interview material was conducted in ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2023a, 2023b, 2024) using the following process:

**Step 1:** Two reviewers (BI & JH) conducted the initial deductive coding in the desktop version of ATLAS.ti. Codebook One largely corresponded to the questions in the interview protocol. Additionally, quotations related to NCV and SCV were subdivided into positive, generic/neutral, and negative sentiment.

**Step 2:** The project was exported to the Web version of ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2024). Categories of quotations were divided among one initial coder (BI) and four additional team members (LA, ME, NTP and SW) to refine codes and inductively generate additional codes representing identified themes to produce Codebook Two (using ATLAS.ti Web versions 5.22 to 7.6.3).

**Step 3:** The resulting codes were reviewed by one of the coders (SW) and organised to produce a structured codebook for coding of the complete material (Codebook Three). We are currently in the process of recoding the material based on the final codebook. In this paper, we report

emerging insights from our analysis based on Codebook Two. We will update our findings as soon as analysis using Codebook Three is complete.

### **3. Emerging Insights**

#### *3.1. Effects of CV format on shortlisting decisions*

Only one panel member reported that reviewing just the NCV would have changed who they shortlisted. Nine of the twelve panel members we interviewed reported that shortlisting based solely on the NCV would only have made little to no difference to the rankings of the candidates in contention for shortlisting and would not have affected who they shortlisted. Two panel members did not directly comment on this.

Most panel members reported that CV format would only have made a small difference to rankings of the strongest applicants, the ones in contention for shortlisting. Two panel members from different recruitments indicated that the ranking of a candidate went down on seeing their SCV after their NCV. For one of these it would have affected shortlisting, as the panel member felt the candidate had exaggerated their achievements in the NCV. For the other one it would not have affected shortlisting. This panel member explained they had given the candidate the benefit of the doubt, assuming achievements were missing from the NCV because of the format rather than because the candidate lacked them. This suggests that although NCVs may not affect shortlisting outcomes in most cases, they could make a difference to a meaningful minority of candidates.

Two panel members suggested that they found it harder to decide how to rank candidates when assessment was based on the NCV relative to the SCV. This may be linked to other observations of panel members reporting that information they had expected to see was missing and information additional to expectations was included in the NCV, which they were less sure how to assess. The wording of the instructions may have contributed to this, and we have improved our instructions for the main phase.

#### *3.2. NCVs implications for candidates' language skills, self-promotion, and non-conventional careers*

Both candidates and panel members expressed concerns about potential biases NCVs could introduce in recruitments. These included that the NCV format may give additional advantages to candidates with good writing skills, those with English as a first language, and those who are good at self-promotion.

Most candidates who suggested that NCVs increased the importance of writing skills also felt they themselves were likely to benefit from this. While acknowledging that the NCV format gave more room for self-presentation, they also reported finding the aspect of self-promotion uncomfortable.

When asked about advantages and disadvantages of Narrative CV, panel members felt that NCVs were unlikely to help candidates who are less proficient in English. Three panel members from three different recruitments reported that NCVs at least partially addressed the problems of those with non-conventional/linear career paths as they provided more opportunity to explain the candidate's career journey and research activities beyond publishing.

#### *3.3. Differences in content between NCV and SCV*

Panel members noted that, when used effectively by candidates, NCVs were helpful for gathering additional information about the candidate beyond what they would expect to find in

an SCV. Some commented that it acted as a stepping stone between an SCV and the information they would expect at interview. There was a difference of opinion about whether this was an intrinsic limitation of the SCV or just the way candidates use SCVs at present. Four panel members felt that the NCV was more flexible in the content that it could include than the SCV; however, three panel members commented that they felt the SCV, if used creatively, could include much of this additional information.

A third of the candidates felt they could showcase a wider range of achievements in the NCV. In contrast, two candidates felt that NCVs might be expected to include information about personal circumstances which they would feel uncomfortable sharing – for example, about difficult experiences or details about the environments they had worked in. They were concerned about whether difficulties they had experienced and overcome would be seen as a positive achievement, or as special pleading, which would disadvantage them.

The most common complaint by candidates was the difficulty of finding experiences and achievements across all the modules queried in the NCV. One candidate also reported the additional anxiety of feeling that they were now being expected to demonstrate a wider range of accomplishments, beyond academic achievement.

#### *3.4. Time and effort*

A critique frequently raised by panel members was the difficulty of quickly extracting the information they were looking for from NCVs, resulting in an increase in time and energy. They also reported that in some cases information was missing. Three panel members commented that the ease of extracting information from SCVs was at least partly due to familiarity with the format – it remains to be seen whether the difference will reduce as recruiters become more familiar with the NCV format.

Among the most common complaints from candidates was the time taken to create an NCV. This may be partly because for the majority of candidates it was their first attempt at writing an NCV. Three candidates reported that although preparing their NCV took a significant time, they felt it would be a good time investment given that NCVs are increasingly requested by research funders. They recognised that updating an NCV would be less work than writing one from scratch. It was not clear whether candidates expected to engage in more or less customisation of their NCVs, relative to their SCVs, for different applications.

Importantly, while the preparation of NCVs is time consuming, the process of preparing them was sometimes seen as enjoyable and a worthwhile activity. Three candidates reported that they had enjoyed the process of preparing their NCV (although only one emphatically so). One candidate commented that the process had helped them understand more about what their wider contributions might include.

#### **4. Strengths and limitations of our approach**

Our research aims to explore the effects of NCVs on postdoc recruitment. Unlike funding applications where both the individual and the scientific idea are being assessed, postdoctoral recruitments rely heavily on information relating to the person in question. An applicant's CV can thus be expected to play an important role in panel members' recruitment decisions.

Our pilot study is limited to a small number of recruitments at the University of Cambridge, although candidates came from a diversity of institutions across the world. As postdoctoral



positions are mostly offered in STEM subjects, our study excludes many postdoctoral candidates from the Arts and Humanities, who are often funded through fellowships.

Not all candidates complied with the instruction to submit an NCV, and not all the NCVs submitted were in the R4RI format. We found that some applicants excluded relevant information from their NCV. One reason for this might be that participants drafted their CVs as complimentary documents, expecting both CVs to be assessed together. We are improving the main phase instructions, asking participants to write both CVs as if they were standalone documents. The PIs that took part in our study are a self-selected group that responded to our recruitment activities, although this group contains both NCV supporters and sceptics.

The strength of our study lies in the realistic and organic setting in which CV formats can be directly compared. Our data is generated by live recruitments with real vacancies, real candidates, and real panel members. Our interference is limited to signposting candidates to available guidance, without imposing additional structures, approaches, or training, to test the effect of changes in CV format rather than recruitment practice. We randomise CV-type assignments; the use of both NCVs and SCVs alongside each other provides internal controls and comparability. Although only the qualitative element of the study is presented here, we are combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, allowing us to measure changes produced by the NCV format and to understand what produces those changes. Note that studying what difference NCV makes for grant applications as opposed to recruitments at the postdoc career stage may result in other conclusions.

## **5. Concluding thoughts**

Based on our emerging insights, it is unclear how strengths and weaknesses of the R4RI NCV format balance. The NCV format has been promoted to increase equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). We found that it may advantage candidates who are proficient at writing and self-promotion. The NCV appears to have most promise for increasing visibility of non-traditional career pathway and acknowledging a wider set of research contributions. However, there may be a tension between the PI's needs, which may correspond to a narrow definition of research productivity in a candidate's profile, and what the system needs, in terms of future leaders and wider research contributions. Narrative CVs might be good for showing the latter, but PIs may be trying to use them for the former. As stated, the underlying differences between the use of NCVs in grant applications compared to postdoctoral recruitment might result in different conclusions emerging for the different uses.

We are currently in the process of refining our analysis from this pilot study; and scaling up our experiment to test our preliminary hypotheses.

## **Open science practices**

We support open science principles and are making research materials and data available where feasible, and where the resources required to do so are proportionate to the likely benefit. Research interview protocols for this study are available at the project's Open Science Foundation repository (see [10.17605/OSF.IO/GWA9R](https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/GWA9R)). As our ethics approval does not cover the necessary permissions, we cannot openly share interview transcripts at this stage, but are able to share the pseudonymised transcripts with researchers who contact us. Unfortunately, as candidates' application materials cannot be reasonably anonymised, we are unable to share them. We plan to openly share the final Codebook (Codebook Three) once analysis based on it has been incorporated in our results.

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**AB:** Methodology; Writing – Review & Editing

**KMD:** Resources

**ZM:** Data Curation; Resources

**KM:** Resources

**SO:** Project Administration

**LS:** Conceptualization; Funding Acquisition; Supervision

**SW:** Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Funding Acquisition; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Writing – Review & Editing

## **Competing interests**

Authors have no competing interests.

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