The Association of American Medical Colleges last month approved a document that, if it becomes more widely adopted, could revolutionize postdoctoral training. The association’s Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and Their Mentors (www.aamc.org/postdoccompact) is powerful because it gives both parties clear responsibilities and sets clear expectations for each side.

It tells postdocs to take primary responsibility for their career development. It states that their research project should be developed with their mentor, and that this should have clearly defined goals and timelines, all of which, ideally, should be agreed at the time the postdoc appointment is made. It asks postdocs to follow good research practices, to adhere to ethical standards and to treat their colleagues with respect. It also challenges them to assume more responsibility as their project progresses and puts the onus on them to request formal performance reviews. And, finally, it charges them to seek professional development activities outside the lab, both in terms of scientific and career development.

On the flip side, mentors are instructed to recognize that postdoctoral fellowships are a training period — not an opportunity to obtain and exploit inexpensive labour. Mentors, too, should establish timelines for research as well as career development goals with their fellows, the compact says. They should base their relationship with fellows on mutual trust and respect. And they should ensure that postdocs have the opportunity to obtain the skills they need — whether on or off the bench.

These guidelines, although challenging, seem to be mutually beneficial. But the compact ups the ante for mentors by asking them to help postdocs explore career options outside academia and to commit to helping their mentees succeed on whatever path they choose. If both postdocs and mentors sign up to this compact it will require a lot of work and commitment from both sides. But it could also help end many of the complaints that each side has about postdoctoral training arrangements.

Paul Smaglik, Naturejobs editor