

Postdocs experience a honeymoon and a countdown phase. Longer contracts provide better retention, and could improve funding efficiency.

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Background:

Postdoc retention is a key factor for team research continuity and individual career development. The effect of contract length, discipline and gender on retention is unclear.

Objective:

Using HR recruitment data from University of Cambridge, we investigated how the contract length impacts retention, and whether there is discipline and gender differences.

Fig.1. Retention over time by contract length

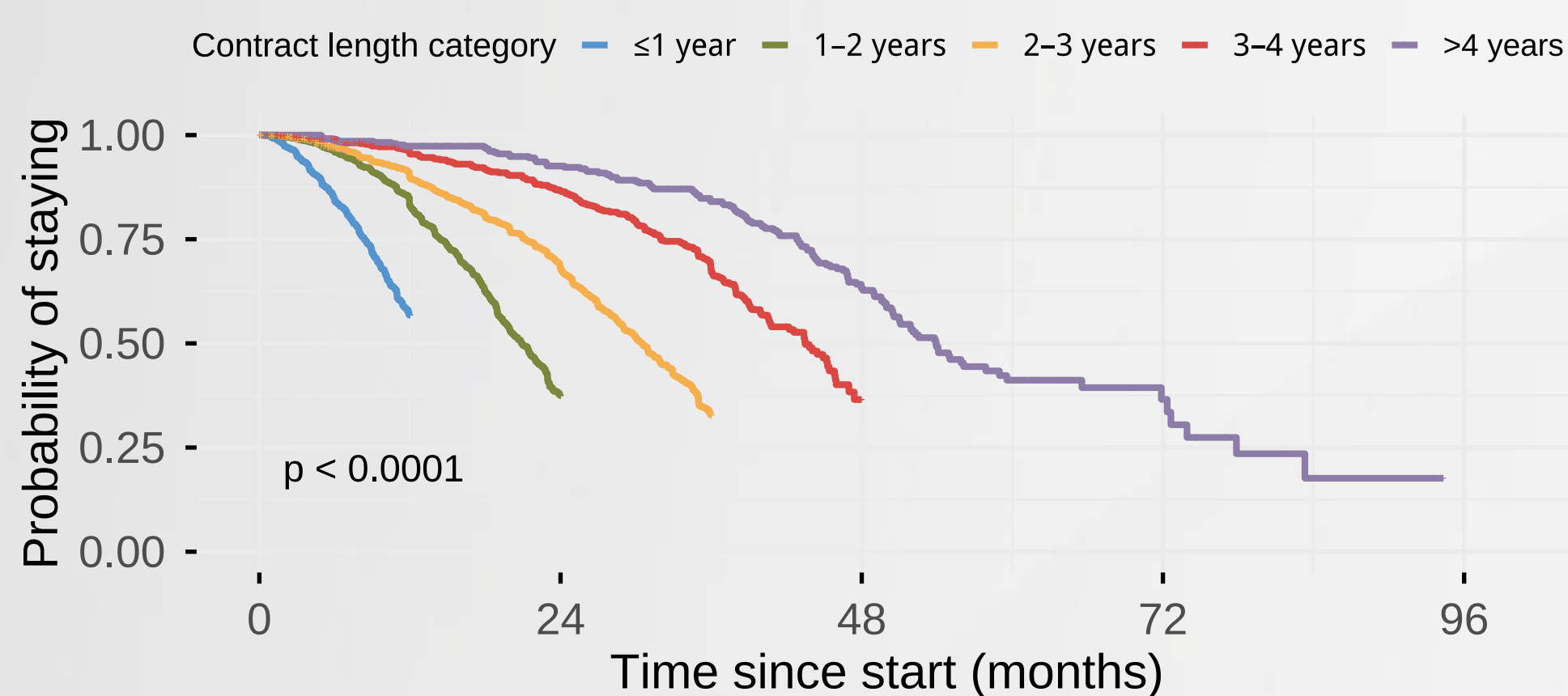


Fig. 2. Contracts share a common terminal countdown slope

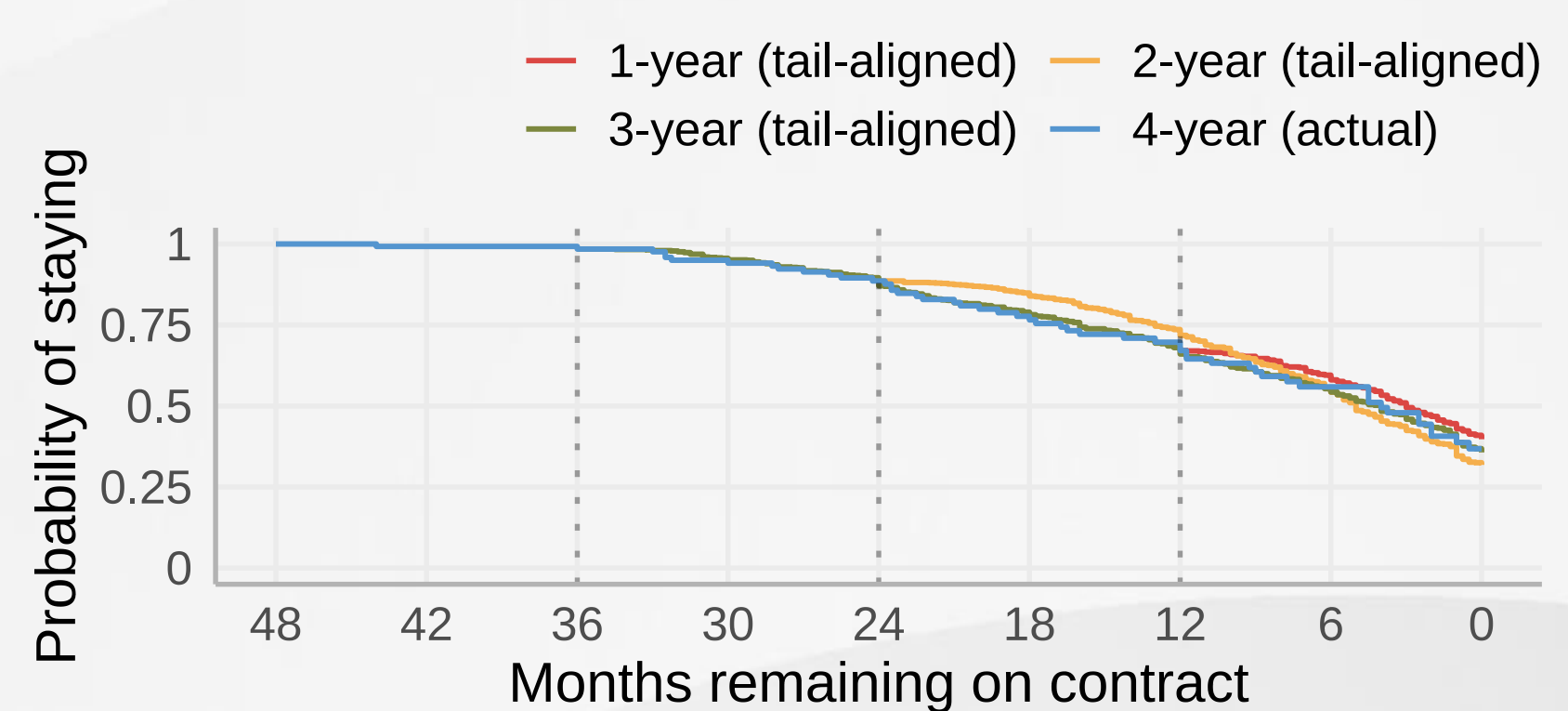
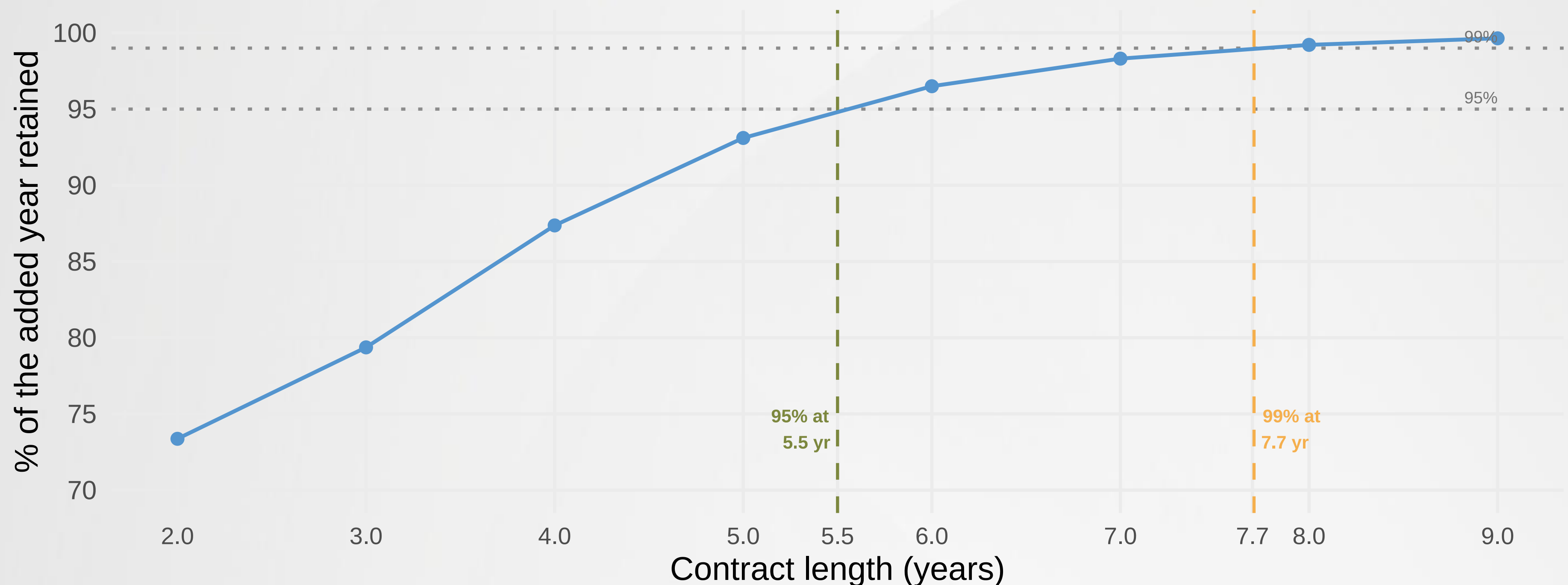


Fig. 3. How much of an added contract year does the appointee stay for?



Findings:

- Longer contracts have better retention over time (Fig. 1).
- Departure timing follows a regular pattern: Postdocs leave slowly at first (honeymoon phase), then faster as the contract nears its end (countdown phase, Fig.2).
- ECRs from the Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences (AHSS) tend to stay in post longer than their peers from Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) disciplines.
- There is no meaningful gender difference in departure rate.
- **Additional years are retained more effectively in longer contracts. As contract length increases, more of each additional year is converted into actual time in post. At around 5.5 years, the additional year is almost fully retained (Fig. 3).**
- Even when postdoc turnover and re-hiring is considered, longer contracts increase the share of the funded period that is staffed.

Limitations:

- Data only comes from one single university, which might limit generalisability.
- The data covers COVID-19 pandemic period. Patterns of retention during this period may differ from those in more typical years.

Challenges and next steps:

- Assess whether the patterns generalise across other universities.
- Comparing data from different countries with different policies, treating policy variation as a natural experiment to assess its impact.