

The Attractions and Distractions of an Academic Career in the UK, and How to be Competitive in the UK Academic Job Market

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Abstract

There are two main career streams for those working in academia in the UK, i.e. lecturing (research & teaching) and research (solely or predominately research focused). The majority of those working in the lecturing track, where the career structure is roughly: Lecturer A-B (36%); Senior Lecturer-Reader (16%); Professor (9%), are on permanent contracts and 75% are aged 40+. The majority of those working in the research track are on fixed term contracts and 33% are aged under 30, and 80% are less than 40 years old. In the UK, 64% of academics are employed in research & teaching positions and 28% are working in research only roles.

Since 1992, higher education institutions in the UK have been experiencing significant change; conferment of university status on polytechnics; growing student numbers; growing numbers of overseas students; changes in funding arrangements, including the introduction of student fees for undergraduates in England; a greater emphasis on quality control and accountability, e.g. RAE, TAE, QAA; and ever growing pressure to produce top quality research outputs. This has not surprisingly had an impact on academics working in the sector. While the opportunity to use initiative, teaching and research continue to be regarded as satisfying aspects of the job, dissatisfaction is evident with pay, opportunities for promotion, the level of administrative work and working hours. The dissatisfaction with pay relates to comparisons with other UK professionals. However, in comparison with the 'real' salaries of academics in other countries, the UK sits below only the USA. Opportunities for promotion are greater in the old universities, where 31% of positions are at the senior lecturer grade and 25% at the professorial grade, the corresponding figures for the new universities are 5% and 22%. Other differences between the new and old universities will be discussed.

While there has been a gradual and continuing improvement in the working conditions for academic researchers on fixed term contracts this varies from university to university and in general these roles provide less job security and access to promotion opportunities than are available to academics on permanent contracts. The main areas of job and career satisfaction reported by academic researchers are flexibility, freedom from teaching and administration and consequently the greater time available to focus on producing publications. Around 34% on the research only career track report their intention to stay within it over the longer term. Following the Robert's report in 2002 there have been a range of national and institution-based initiatives to improve the level of personal, professional and career management training and development provided to PhD students and academic researchers in the UK. The UK Research Councils have recently announced a £15m contract to develop a national programme (along the lines of the UK Grad Programme for PhDs) for academic researchers.

The ratio of UK to foreign academic staff is 3:1; more non-UK staff are employed in the old universities. In fact, notwithstanding the right of EEA nationals to work in the UK, UK HEIs (especially the pre-1992 universities) are probably amongst the most willing UK employers to seek work permits where these are required for new recruits.

There are 13,000 graduates each year from UK PhD programmes (56% UK nationals, 12% EU and 32% non-EU). This includes 1,300 social science PhDs, and their reported employment rate is over 84% (only UK nationals surveyed). Their unemployment rate is under 3% (which compares well with undergraduates, 6% and masters, 4%). In the UK approximately 50% of social sciences PhDs take up an academic role on graduating. These are split 32% Lectureships (research

& teaching) and 15% research only positions. There are no specific figures for those taking up 'career bridging' postdoctoral fellowship positions.

Although postdoctoral fellowships are often research focused and by their nature subject to fixed term contracts, the inherent expectation in many of them, is that they will lead, by their conclusion, to a successful Lectureship application. Increasingly, within the UK system whether a postdoc is: for one, two or three years; funded by a research council, university or trust; focused on publications originating from the PhD and/or the start-up of a new piece of research, it is seen as a way to add value to the postdoctoral CV and become more competitive in the academic market place.

Notwithstanding the variety and rate of change referred to above, the primary requirements for academic positions in the UK are still: research record and potential; publication record and potential; teaching and supervisory experience (for any post involving teaching); exposure to, or experience of, applying for research funding; and within the lecturing career stream in particular, a willingness to contribute to departmental development and administration. The relative importance of each of these will change depending on career stage and job level, as will the depth and variety of experience required in each. It is possible for a soon to submit or just graduated PhD to be successful in their application for a Lecturer position (usually level A) or a Research Officer role, but this is usually on the basis of the value they had added to their CV during their PhD and how well this is presented in their application package and selection interview. A key factor will also be the quality of the academic references they receive.