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Moving abroad: Relocating from the US to the UK

An ebook for American Academics
looking for work in the UK



Introduction

This ebook explores the advantages and challenges facing academics from the United States when they are considering moving to the UK for work. It offers a step by step guide including top tips to help you to maximise your chances in the UK academic job market.

This ebook will cover:

- Reasons why working overseas might be good for you personally and for your career
- Differences between the two academic systems. The US and the UK may share the same language, but university life in the two countries is very different and our ebook will help to orient you through these differences
- Practical challenges faced by those moving to another country for work
- Interviews with scholars who have made this transition provide case studies.

We hope that you find this ebook useful and that it helps you to decide whether or not to make that move.

Top tip:

To see what jobs are available why not sign up to jobs.ac.uk's FREE [Jobs by Email service?](#)



Why work in overseas academia?

If you are an academic there are many reasons why working in another country might seem very attractive. This section discusses general reasons for wishing to work abroad before going on to examine the specifics that might attract US citizens to work in Britain.



Academic job market

If you have been trying for many years to get a job in your own country with little success then perhaps the job market there is so competitive that you ought to try to find a job elsewhere. Although finding an academic job is a challenge across the world, broadening your jobseeking horizons will open up new opportunities for you. Or perhaps you already have an academic job and simply fancy a new challenge?

If you search for jobs in another country then you may find a permanent job more quickly than if you search only narrowly within one country. Natalie Zacek's experience reflects this. Natalie is a senior lecturer in American Studies at the University of Manchester. She did her PhD at Johns Hopkins University and she came to work in Manchester simply because they were the first university to offer her a permanent position. The reason that she had considered going to the UK in the first place was, as she puts it, the 'dismal' state of the US job market in the late 1990s.

John Troyer moved from the US to Bath because the University of Bath was able to offer him exactly the right combination of teaching and research. He said 'this job was ideal, as it was a hybrid programme of research and teaching, and offered me permanent employment at the University of Bath. After conducting research at the University for two years I was offered a lectureship position.'

Read the rest of our [interview with John Troyer here.](#)



Your topic of study

Perhaps moving to another country makes sense if you work in a field that is much livelier elsewhere or that has specific relevance abroad. For example, if you are based in the US and you study British History, the opportunity to work in Britain will seem more attractive. You may have undertaken work in the UK as part of your PhD and thus have some knowledge about UK academic life.

Personal development

Another reason to work overseas is for personal development. For example, you may want to immerse yourself in the culture of another country or you may want a personal challenge or a new start. If this is the case, then think long and hard before making such a move because it will be a lot of work and will result in a complete change of lifestyle. You may have a personal love for another country and its culture and lifestyle. However, make sure that you really love the country as it actually is, rather than some romantic vision of an idealised place.

Improve your CV

You may be strategically planning your career development and decide that a period working abroad will enhance your CV. Certainly experience of working in academia in another country does impress employers. It means that you will develop contacts that will be useful to the internationalisation agenda. Universities around the world are now thinking globally in terms of their research connections and their marketability to students and so if you have international experience, you will be an attractive candidate.

Read our article on [the internationalisation agenda in UK universities](#)

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There are also specific reasons why US citizens will be attracted to the UK as a place to work. The shared language and similar culture mean that relocating will be less stressful and settling in to work life happens more quickly.

Specifics about the UK that may attract you are the cooler and darker weather (provided you are not a sun worshipper of course). The climate of the UK is not as wet as you will have heard, probably most similar to that of the Pacific North West, although with less snow in winter. You will also often be able to take advantage of a public transport system that is much more regular and reliable than in the US.

The UK academic system

There is some basic information that will help you apply for a job in the UK. UK universities are divided informally into research intensive institutions known as [the Russell Group](#) and the rest which are more teaching focused. Some universities are known as 'post-92' institutions. This means that they are former polytechnics that achieved university status in 1992. They will have a stronger focus on teaching and on vocational qualification.

UK universities are funded by student fees and some government subsidy. Money from the government is distributed through an organisation known as [HEFCE](#) (the Higher Education Funding Council for England). Recently student fees in some institutions rose to £9000 per year and this has caused a fluctuation in student numbers and uncertainty in the market.

Researchers can apply for individual or group grants from the funding councils. They also fund PhD and postdoctoral research projects. The funding councils are gathered together in an organisation known as [RCUK](#)

Each discipline has its own funding council and these issue grant and fellowship announcements every year. An example is [the Arts and Humanities Research Council](#)

Differences in academic system

This section will discuss the differences between the US and UK academic systems and the impact that this has on members of staff moving from one region to the other. Despite the shared culture and language mentioned above, there are significant differences between US and UK academia and it is important that you are aware of these before throwing yourself into a big move.

The most significant difference between US and UK academia is the tenure system. In the US this requires academics and their research, teaching and administration record to be assessed by their peers before securing a permanent position. In the UK, jobs are advertised as either temporary or permanent. Although some temporary jobs are eventually made permanent, there is no formal 'tenure' process which leads to this. Instead, UK jobs have a probationary system during which you will be assigned a mentor. In this period your contract can be terminated more easily if either you or the university are unhappy with the move.

Of course, there are advantages to both systems. Both Natalie Zacek and Catherine Minter, a subject liaison librarian at Indiana University Libraries, acknowledge that the US tenure system is hugely demanding and stressful, but that it can help ensure equality between colleagues.

The UK system has an audit culture in which universities and departments are audited once every five or seven years or so as part of the Research Excellence Framework. This system can be challenging for US academics because it means that there is considerable pressure to publish, based not on personal inclination or academic rigour, but simply to fulfil the demands of this audit.

According to Catherine, she finds the US academia significantly different. She believes that it is easier to get acknowledgement and be rewarded (e.g. through grants and awards) for hard work in the USA, perhaps owing to the stronger commitment to positivity generally in American culture. The American system might be said to be more discursive and collaborative than the UK one (with lots of opportunities to talk about one's projects and lots of conferences and workshops), although this is changing in the UK as funding bodies and auditors reward collaborative work. According to Natalie, American scholars moving to the UK will find themselves doing much more administrative work compared to US universities (partly because of a lack of administrative support). Also module design and assessment structure have to be approved within the department according to fairly strict norms and regulations meaning that individual academics face a certain lack of autonomy.

Another significant difference between the US and UK systems is the type of student you will find in your classroom. Most students you encounter will have chosen to take your class because it relates closely to their degree subject. As an historian in the UK, you are unlikely to have to teach Chemistry or Business Studies majors who have to take a History class to fulfil their quota. In theory this means that your students will be more enthusiastic and better prepared in terms of the skills and knowledge that they bring to the classroom.

More on the [Research Excellence Framework audit system](#)

Useful websites:

[A list of UK universities and their addresses](#)

[A map showing locations of UK universities](#)



Applying for an academic job

The best place to look to find an academic job in the UK is the jobs.ac.uk website. It is a jobs board that advertises university lecturing, research and managerial vacancies as well as research posts in commercial companies.

You will find that the language used in UK job adverts might be slightly different. For example 'faculty' in the UK refers to a cluster of departments grouped together by subject area (so, for example, the Humanities Faculty or the Social Sciences Faculty).

Job titles are also slightly different. Some universities in the UK use the American model of assistant professor or associate professor but most use lecturer, senior lecturer, reader and professor. For more information see the [jobs.ac.uk jobs profiles section](#).

For more details on how to apply for an academic job in the UK, have a look at our [ebook](#).

Top tips on coping with practical challenges of emigrating:

- **Stay in close contact with the HR department of your new university; they can provide help and advice**
- **Balance the need to keep in contact with friends and family 'back home' with the importance of making new friends in your new home**
- **Research before you go: use the internet to familiarise yourself with your new country in advance of your move**
- **Read our article on ['starting a new job'](#) to prepare you for the challenges you'll face in a new workplace.**

Practical and personal challenges

As well as overcoming the differences in academic system, there are many other practical difficulties faced by staff moving to work in another country.

According to Catherine Minter the initial stage involved in moving to a different country for work is usually taken care of by the employer's Human Resources department.

However, for more information please visit the [UK border agency website](#).

On arrival in your new country, you may find that, like Catherine that 'the burden of responsibility associated with living and working legally in a foreign culture hit me'.

Visas provide the greatest source of anxiety and ongoing stress as your residency status might change and there will be requirements to keep your embassy updated on your situation. However, that might not be the only problem faced by migrating to the UK for work. Issues such as an absence of credit history in the UK might mean that you are unable to buy a house or take out loans for a car straightaway.

Psychological challenges might also threaten to overwhelm you if you do not have ways of managing your stress levels and if you do not have a support network that you can rely on. It can be stressful adapting to a new environment, and couple this with the stress of starting a new job, missing friends and family, and wondering whether you have made the right decision and you will be under considerable psychological stress. It is vital to monitor yourself and to ensure that your mental health is not suffering because of preparations to move or the move itself.

If you are moving with a partner or family, this might mean that you personally suffer fewer feelings of isolation and loneliness, but this can also present a whole new set of challenges as you have to worry about their happiness too and finding relevant work and schooling for them.

However, on the positive side, moving to the UK will not be as disorienting as a move elsewhere. A shared language (well, apart from some strange differences such as 'petrol' meaning 'gas' and 'trousers' meaning 'pants!') and a common cultural heritage mean that many people moving between the US and the UK feel instantly 'at home'. You are also very unlikely to experience any anti-American hostility in the UK, although remember that the UK is not the country of pretty small villages that you imagine and it has its own social problems.

Conclusion

This ebook has shown you the most important factors to consider when planning a move from the US to the US to work in an academic role.

To summarise, there are several reasons why you might want to move in the first place, including a constricted job market at home, a means of personal career development or because your topic of study is especially relevant in the UK.

However, a move to another country is not to be taken lightly. There are some significant differences in UK academia which may surprise you. There is no formal tenure system in the UK. This has its advantages and disadvantages. There is the burden of an audit culture which increasingly tends to define how and what scholars research and publish.

Finally, the feel of UK academia is often more formal and encourages independent rather than collaborative working, although this is changing. Finally it is important to consider the practical and personal challenges that will face you when you move to a new country. Your employer will help you to arrange work permits and visas but you may find it difficult to get a loan for a house or car initially. You also have to consider the stress that such a move will put on you, and your family if moving with them. On a positive note, many people in the UK are welcoming and friendly towards Americans and you will have no trouble settling in and making new friends.

About the author

Dr Catherine Armstrong is a Senior Lecturer in American History at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has previously held positions at the University of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University. Her first monograph 'Writing North America in the Seventeenth Century' was published by Ashgate in June 2007. Her previous jobseeking experience means that Catherine is in a great position to understand and offer her knowledge and experience to those developing an academic career.



Author: Dr Catherine Armstrong

For more information on the practicalities of life in the UK, have a look at [jobs.ac.uk's UK Country Profile](#)



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