

# Navigating the International Academic Job Market

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## ABSTRACT

Given the extraordinarily competitive academic job market in the United States, this article explores a relatively new prospect for American-trained political science PhD graduates: teaching at a foreign institution. The article proceeds in two parts. First, it discusses various benefits and challenges associated with working abroad. Second, it provides practical guidance for candidates considering the international job market.

The US academic job market for newly minted political science PhDs and those all but dissertation (ABD) appears to be as tight as ever (American Political Science Association 2013). Vacancy announcements for tenure-track assistant professors at colleges and universities around the country routinely receive more than 100 applications from well-qualified candidates. Reasons for the overabundance of jobseekers abound: reduced budgets for new tenure lines due to strained federal and state resources; reluctance of departments to hire individuals from “non-elite” programs; fewer retirements; the rise of online education; the decline of philanthropic support; and various other economic, political, and educational forces (King and Sen 2013). American higher education likely will face increasing pressure in the future because federal deficit problems may result in further cuts to educational funding. Unfortunately, this means that the type of research and teaching record that may have guaranteed a candidate a job a decade ago may no longer be sufficient to secure one today.

In this type of job environment, how can a jobseeker maximize prospects for employment on graduation? Some opt for postdoctoral positions to have more time to publish before (or after) testing the job-market waters. Others take visiting positions in the hope of becoming more marketable in the near future. Still others leave the academic profession altogether. A fourth option has become attractive for recent graduates of doctoral programs in political science: teaching at a foreign institution. Whereas the American job market continues to lag, the number of overseas positions in political science has increased dramatically in recent years. During the 2012–2013 job season alone, institutions posted political science job openings in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Canada, Chile, China, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Iraq, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Russia, Singapore, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and many others. Consequently, many American-trained PhDs have moved abroad to take advantage of these opportunities. This article provides practical guidance for those contemplating an academic career in political science abroad.<sup>1</sup>

## TEACHING ABROAD: CARPE DIEM OR CAVEAT EMPTOR?

Not long ago, it was relatively uncommon for American academics to work abroad; now, as the higher-education landscape changes, opportunities for US-trained political scientists are multiplying around the world. One way that some American-based institutions of higher education have attempted to increase the number of students they are able to reach and to create a more sustainable business model is by developing branch campuses overseas. Examples include Yale-NUS, Singapore’s first liberal arts college; New York University’s campuses in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi; Carnegie Mellon’s planned campus in Rwanda; the branches of Duke University, Stanford University, and University of California at Berkeley in China; and the six American universities that have opened satellite campuses in Doha’s Education City. As these American universities expand their global reach, opportunities abound for American political scientists to globalize their careers.

For those who study political science, particularly international relations or comparative politics, working at a foreign institution may be a natural fit. These individuals find the politics and cultures of other countries fascinating, and many have studied or carried out field research in one or more countries outside of the United States. Therefore, teaching at an institution in a country where one has a scholarly interest may prove to be an attractive option for a candidate having a difficult time in the American job market.

Two regions in particular are currently experiencing a boom in higher education and actively seek Western academics: Asia and the Middle East. In a 2010 *Foreign Affairs* article, the president of Yale University, Richard C. Levin, made the case that several Asian states—realizing the importance of education for sustained economic growth—have made massive investments in their systems of higher education (Levin 2010). China built almost 1,000 new higher-education institutions from 2000 to 2010, and India will establish 1,000 new universities in the next 10 years. Many of these institutions seek quality, Western-trained scholars to teach and conduct research. Levin predicts that by 2050, top Asian universities will stand as some of the best in the world (Levin 2010). Due to the shortages of qualified professors and coupled with large middle-class populations aspiring to study at the college level in these countries, Asian institutions will continue to aggressively recruit professors from abroad. Many countries have already developed their own indigenous first-rate institutions of higher education based on the Western model.

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The Middle East is another region where higher education is experiencing a boom, particularly the oil-rich Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula (Middle East Institute 2010). Many of these positions specifically target those who have completed their PhD at a Western-accredited university and have experience teaching in a Western system of higher education. Some may find these jobs appealing because they are based on the “expatriate model,” which includes a generous employment package. In addition to a tax-exempt basic salary, these positions generally include subsidized housing, annual roundtrip airfare for the employee and his or her immediate family, health and/or life insurance, professional membership fees, conference-attendance expenses, assistance with children’s tuition, transportation allowances, and various other advantages.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in contrast to the rest of the region, the Gulf Emirates are relatively stable, accessible, safe, cosmopolitan, and forward-looking in terms of directing money toward educational endeavors. These factors explain why many high-profile US institutions have been willing to open branch campuses like those found in Doha’s luminous “Education City.” Undoubtedly, many more American and European satellite campuses will open in the Gulf States in the future.<sup>3</sup>

So, should one consider a job abroad? To be sure, the American system of higher education, despite challenges, remains the best in the world. Domestic teaching offers professors the opportunity to stay close to their family and friends and to enjoy a high standard of living and generally favorable social norms. Yet, because the US academic market has become so strained, American-trained PhDs may find better-paying jobs and more research funding in Europe, Asia, or the Middle East. New institutions are quickly springing up around the world that do not face the same types of obstacles confronting American colleges and universities. Countries in the developing world, for instance, are quickly realizing that building strong institutions of higher education is necessary to develop their societies and enhance their national reputations. Prominent examples include CIDE in Mexico, Khalifa University in the United Arab Emirates, and the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh. Due to their relative inexpensiveness in terms of tuition, their growing prestige, and their location, these institutions are likely to become a domestic alternative for students who may have at one time aspired to study in the United States.

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Nevertheless, the decision to teach at a foreign institution is not one to be taken lightly. Whereas teaching abroad can present tremendous opportunities, it also may introduce substantial challenges, especially for those unfamiliar with the culture of a particular country. This is clearly evident in the Middle East. The strong support given to higher education in certain countries in the region means that governments reserve the right to limit or quash altogether the teaching of controversial topics, thereby limiting academic freedom (Ross 2011). China also is notorious for its various restrictions on speech and expression. Yale University students and faculty in Singapore cannot hold protests on campus or establish certain political groups. Although speaking out against the government in these places almost never results in imprisonment (because many

of these governments seek harmonious relations with the United States), foreigners who openly criticize the government could face possible deportation—especially those working at indigenous universities not part of a satellite institution based in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Some academics find teaching in such conditions morally and pragmatically unacceptable. Restrictions on free speech and academic liberty, they believe, will necessarily lead to self-censorship at the cost of a genuine education. Unlike their counterparts in the hard sciences whose fields of study rarely concern local elites, political scientists—especially those who study, teach, and strongly believe in ideas such as human rights, multiparty democracy, and universal enfranchisement—may find it difficult to come to terms with the idea of educating individuals who have incentives to continue a system hostile to their own values.<sup>5</sup>

Optimists, conversely, might see the opportunity to educate young people in these countries as a step toward greater personal and political liberty and as a stimulus for the intellectual growth of the countries where they work (Stearns 2011). They believe that the cross-cultural discourse and intellectual connections that are part and parcel of higher education have the capability to produce more open and free societies—even if this means tolerating certain practices and conventions that Westerners may find less than optimal. The goal is progress and the understanding of shared values. Nevertheless, finding a proper balance between respect for local cultures and high educational standards that are rooted in free inquiry, freedom of expression, and open access to information can be difficult. Ultimately, it is important to remember that expatriate professors are guests of the country in which they teach. Even if they do not accept certain aspects of the broader culture, they must be acquainted with and work within the country’s established laws and regulations.

Various nonacademic issues need to be considered, too. Although housing and family benefits may be alluring, contracts are not always upheld, and unwelcomed surprises may await foreign faculty. An American professor based in the Middle East explained that whereas housing may be provided by the institution, utilities could be subtracted from the base salary. In some cases, faculty have reported not being paid in accordance with the provisions of their contract. Married individuals may have trouble finding

their spouse a job. An American colleague teaching in Great Britain informed me that universities there do not hire accompanying spouses, for instance. When education subsidies for children are not provided, schooling can prove to be both limited and expensive. More important, women, religious minorities, and homosexuals have experienced difficulties that do not exist (or to a much lesser extent) in the United States when teaching at schools in the developing world. Legal restrictions on dress, worship, and gender equality may make working in certain places particularly onerous. Potential job candidates are advised to do significant research on both the specific school to which they are applying and the country in which they will be employed before they submit job applications.

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## THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Knowledge is power when it comes to the international job search. The more one understands about how the application process works in different countries, the expectations of the position being advertised, and the broader institutional and cultural context, the better are the chances of landing a job at a foreign school. Yet, understanding the application process for universities in different countries can take a great deal of time. The best way, of course, to become familiar with a specific country is to visit it personally by attending conferences there, conducting research, or taking

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part in an academic exchange program. Time spent in a country is also invaluable in terms of cultivating contacts with professors and learning the nuances of how higher education works in that particular location. Those entering the international job market should consider the following advice when applying for foreign jobs.

### 1. Know where to find jobs

The international job search naturally begins with knowing where to locate jobs. International teaching positions are commonly listed on job websites that also list academic positions in the United States. These websites include the *Chronicle for Higher Education* website ([chronicle.com](http://chronicle.com)), [higheredjobs.com](http://higheredjobs.com), the American Political Science Association e-jobs website ([www.apsanet.org/jobs/index.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/jobs/index.cfm)), [insidehighered.com](http://insidehighered.com), and the International Studies Association jobs website ([sites.google.com/a/isanet.org/employment-ads](http://sites.google.com/a/isanet.org/employment-ads)). These websites contain search features that make it easy to locate political science positions outside of the United States.

When targeting a specific country, become familiar with how jobs are advertised there. Many countries have central job sites that include postings for academia. For example, British universities advertise their positions at [jobs.ac.uk](http://jobs.ac.uk); South African schools at [careerjet.co.za](http://careerjet.co.za); and Japanese institutions at [jrecin.jst.go.jp](http://jrecin.jst.go.jp). Hiring institutions in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates also list positions at [unijobs.com](http://unijobs.com), a clearinghouse for academic jobs in those countries. [Campusreview.com.au](http://Campusreview.com.au) also features jobs exclusively related to Australian higher education. Simple Google searches will aid in finding academic job websites for particular countries or regions. It also is a great benefit to have contacts in these countries that can enlighten jobseekers about the norms, expectations, and hiring practices of that particular country as well as about open positions at their school.

### 2. Understand the different job-market seasons

Second, note that the job-market “season” diverges greatly in different parts of the world. American tenure-track political science jobs are generally posted beginning in June or July and diminish toward November. After that, the majority of jobs are of the adjunct or visiting-professor type. As the job market winds down in the United States, it may be starting up in other countries. In some countries, the academic year corresponds to the calendar year; for example, jobs posted in one year may have a starting date of January in the next year, meaning a shorter

application and hiring timeline and less time to prepare for relocating if a position is offered.

### 3. Craft materials carefully

For hints about how best to craft application materials, jobseekers should consult the online CVs of faculty at the institution where they are applying or those of professors at another school in the same country. Follow their formatting and grammatical conventions. Jobseekers also should be familiar with the important higher-education publications in the target country and should develop a

solid grasp of the core issues facing colleges and universities there. It is obvious that jobseekers will need to know about how higher education operates in the places where they desire employment.

If useful or accurate information on a particular university or country is difficult to obtain, it may be worthwhile to consult information available for similar institutions in another country. One way to proceed is to know whether a foreign school operates on the basis of the American or British educational system. Knowing this simple fact can signal how materials should be crafted and what to expect during the hiring process. For instance, universities in Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia—although certainly having differences—also share several similarities. For instance, follow the British spelling norms when applying for jobs in these countries. Also be aware that the academic hierarchy does not follow the assistant-associate-full professor trajectory as in the United States but instead begins with lecturer and progresses to senior lecturer, reader, and ultimately professor. Finally, remember that the British ranking system does not operate according to the American tenure system. Making these seemingly simple modifications in application materials can impart the message that an applicant would be a good fit for a particular department.

It is also helpful to know that the substance of higher education can function quite differently outside of the United States. Many colleges and universities based on the British educational system do not offer an American-style liberal arts curriculum; rather, they require their students to specialize in a chosen field of study for their entire undergraduate career. Cultural differences also are evident in the classroom. A Western professor in East Asia explained that students raised in traditional Asian societies, although they are extremely bright, tend not to openly voice their opinions in class, learning more on the basis of rote memorization than on critical thinking. Familiarity with these higher-education norms can provide a decided advantage over competitors.

### 4. Learn about the interview process

If an applicant makes it past the initial screening, the next step is likely a Skype or telephone interview rather than the customary fly-out interview. Jobseekers must be able to make a positive and immediate impact in a relatively short period. As discussed previously, by this time, jobseekers should be quite familiar with the school to which they are applying and the country of residence. Well-researched questions should be written in advance and

convey enthusiasm and intelligence. An applicant might ask about the balance between research and teaching expectations, administrative duties, student–faculty ratios, and so forth. If the applicant is offered a fly-out interview, the format may be different than the typical American academic interview. In the United Kingdom, for instance, very often five rather than three candidates are interviewed; job discussions are usually shorter; and interviews are conducted by a faculty panel.

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When offered a position, this is the last opportunity for an applicant to reconsider before accepting the assignment. At this point, it is beneficial to speak with expatriate colleagues and ask for their candid experiences teaching at that particular school as well as how federal and local laws and culture shape the educational environment. A follow-up conversation with the department chair or dean also is beneficial with respect to learning more about specific duties and the culture of the institution. This is also the last opportunity to ask questions that were not asked during the interview.

Finally, because the transition can be logistically complex, international job applicants should be aware that becoming acclimated to their new personal and professional settings will take much time and energy. Copious paperwork and endless documentation should be expected. Visas are usually temporary and connected to the length of the employment contract and the fees often are not included in relocation expenses. Immunizations also will be necessary depending on specific requirements in different parts of the world. In addition, there are issues of transportation, satisfactory housing, and schooling if the applicant has children. Learning the local language and understanding the region's culture can be invaluable in ameliorating some of the difficulties of the transition period. Last, before officially accepting a job, applicants should ensure that their affairs are in order before the departure date.

### 5. Stay connected

Finally, it is important for faculty who accept postings overseas to stay connected with their colleagues in the United States, especially if they may want to return in the future. Some may hesitate to take a position at a foreign university because of the perceived difficulty in returning to American academia at some point. Indeed, this is a legitimate concern because low-budget search committees may not be receptive to the costly idea of flying in a candidate from another country for an interview. Furthermore, teaching in a foreign country may make it difficult to attend APSA meetings. If applicants accept a position abroad but desire to return, they should be prepared to pay out-of-pocket for the plane fare for an interview, or they should consider taking a temporary position in the United States from which they can apply for other jobs. Conversely, teaching internationally may boost one's credentials with those institutions intent on recruiting international students and expanding their global reach. Regardless, it is important to stay connected to the American

academic community to gain a sense of which types of institutions may value this unique set of experiences if one wants to reenter the American job market.

### CONCLUSION

Today, more and more American-trained political science faculty at all stages in their careers are pursuing employment overseas because globalization has provided opportunities beyond American

campuses. Some opt for short-term visiting professorships, whereas others seek long-term commitments in one or more countries. International teaching comes with both benefits and challenges. Expatriate academic life can be exotic, full of adventure, life-changing, and professionally satisfying. Working in a country of interest with respect to one's research can provide political scientists with incredible access to materials, data, and indigenous experts, thereby enhancing professional development in ways that are possible only from teaching abroad. It also comes with certain risks. The issues highlighted in this article should be given earnest consideration by those contemplating an international job search. ■

### NOTES

1. This article was written by a PhD candidate on the international job market during the 2012–2013 academic year.
2. American citizens remain responsible for paying US taxes on incomes of more than \$92,000.
3. Current American universities that have opened campuses in the Gulf include Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University, Northwestern University, Texas A&M University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, New York University, Boston University, and Rochester Institute of Technology.
4. A notable exception to this rule occurred when Nasser bin Ghaith, an economics professor at the Abu Dhabi branch of Paris-Sorbonne University, was arrested in 2011 after his calls for judicial reform.
5. Some institutions, including the University of Connecticut and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, have decided not to open branch campuses in the Middle East for these very reasons.

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