Securing a Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts

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Introduction

- Jumping from PhD -> postdoc is, perhaps, the hardest jump for someone with a new doctorate to make.
- Few PhDs actually remain in academia long-term:
  - Figures range between 15% and 0.1%, depending on subject and place, but I think around 5% is accurate.
  - And that’s all professors – if you want to stay in research, we’re probably looking more like 0.5%, or even lower, whilst the remainder work in “teaching institutions”.
- There are dozens of PhD students per available postdoc, maybe more: so how do you get one?
Introduction

- I finished my doctorate two years ago, and subsequently did one postdoc for 18 months, another for 6 months, and now this one for 6 months (and counting).
- In the process, I applied to a total of 33 postdocs, all with custom hand-crafted research proposals between 1,000, and 10,000 (!) words…
- I was accepted to 7, in four countries, and three continents, for a 21% or 1-in-5 success rate.
- I know more about postdocs than I care to…
- Please interrupt and ask questions throughout!
Different Countries

- Canada and the United States are similar in academia.
- The US is probably the strongest nation for academia in the world, and Canada is probably third?
- However, more PhDs produced than anywhere else...
- **Do:** be prepared for intense competition, focus on a strong public profile (the “superstar academic”), be meticulous, stress your love of teaching.
- **Don’t:** apply to unrealistic postdocs (more on this later), come across “like a grad student” (don’t talk too much about your PhD!), appear unambitious.
Different Countries

- The UK is probably the #2 nation for academia.
- Funding is drying up somewhat in light of recent events, but still lots to be had from various sources.
- **Do:** stress public visibility, the potential for policy impact, the potential for “everyday” impact, the reputations of the journals you published in, the quality of your teaching (ideally via feedback).
- **Don't:** forget to talk about class/inequality, seem ignorant of the country, exclude external partners (if relevant).
Different Countries

- The “strongest” academic country outside the UK in Europe is perhaps Germany, several world top 100 Universities.
- However, German academia is quite conservative, and particular fields dominate over all others.
- **Do:** pitch a project on medieval theology, not modern technology; focus on fields like law, literature, drama, history, philology, etc; be prepared for brutally honest feedback; expect to write long proposals.
- **Don’t:** talk about public engagement, talk about other activities beyond the academy.
Different Countries

- Or Scandinavian countries?
- Strong research Universities, generally speaking English is entirely acceptable, strong tradition of academic freedom.
- **Do:** stress willingness (and excitement!) to move, be (or seem!) outgoing and cosmopolitan, focus on new fields, align strongly with institutional priorities, stress active publication and conference presentation schedule.
- **Don't:** ...focus too much on older fields.
In South-East Asia, we are talking about two cities / territories / countries: Hong Kong and Singapore.

These are both ultra-modern “Westernised” metropolises.

Both have strong research Universities (4-6 in world top 100), very generous wages, keen to attract Western academics.

**Do:** emphasise non-academic impact (esp. Sing), pitch modern fields, economy, technology, show teaching skill (esp. HK); seem innovative, modern, responsive. Make clear your excitement at moving to the region.

**Don’t:** be esoteric, explore “old” fields, seem naïve, lack at least a few strong publications.
Different Countries

- Different countries have very different academic climates, and prioritise very different things.
- A strong CV is always good, but what you pitch, how you pitch, and what non-academic benefits (if any) you pitch, are absolutely crucial, and the #1 difference between having a shot, and going in the bin.
- Competition is so fierce you must be precisely accurate.
- Sadly, I cannot help you out with Australian, other European, or New Zealand postdocs – I only ever applied for one in Australia, there were 1,000 candidates, and I didn’t get it! But that tells us a lot by itself…
The Importance of Supervisors

- 1) Finding them, and having them support your application.
- Every successful postdoc application I ever sent off was one where I secured institutional support from (a) faculty member(s) early, and we worked closely, and they were very keen for me to succeed.
- Supervisors support you behind the scenes (essential!).
- Also shows you care about the institution and know about it.
- They will give you lots of advice, and will know well relevant institutional politics to support your application.
- Never apply without a supervisor secured, except in exceptional circumstances.
The Importance of Supervisors

- 2) Finding a good supervisor you can work with.
- How much self-direction do you want, and how much do you want to follow their lead?
- What are your key personality traits, and do they (seem to) share those traits?
- Does anything about them make you at all uncertain about how they will be like to work with? If so: follow your gut and do not work with them!
- Do you have particular or unusual working patterns or schedules, like I do? Will they accommodate?
Postdoc Types

1) Somebody else’s project, almost any University.

- The most common kind of postdoc, and the easiest to get – there is a project already in place, and they want someone to go and do it.
- The lowest prestige, and makes it harder to pursue your own research (unless lucky), but keeps you in work.
- Competition generally in the tens of candidates.
- Can also build strong connections for future references if you do a very good job; and can sometimes be extended.
- Best place to start, barring unusually strong CV.
Postdoc Types

2) Your project, research-intensive University.

- What I have, and what you want to aim for.
- You pitch your own project, and if accepted, you do nothing but your own research for, generally, 1-3 years (normally 2, exceptionally up to 5 years).
- High prestige, enough for tenure-track jobs at most research-intensive institutions.
- Competition generally in the hundreds of candidates.
- Needs originality, a realistic sense of scope and time, a compelling research vision for many years, etc.
Postdoc Types

- 3) Your project, top-tier (world #1-#20) institution.
  - For these, you might be competing with, literally, one thousand candidates for one or two spots.
  - Ultra-high prestige, guarantees later tenure-track jobs.
  - Classic examples are “Society of Fellows” postdocs.
  - Don’t bother. You need nothing but top-tier institutions on your CV, some papers (in good journals), and ideally, a book (with a good press). Don’t waste your time on them. If you want to work at Harvard, Cambridge, MIT, etc, you have to work up to it slowly.
Postdoc Types

4) The weird but promising postdoc.

“Two months in Scotland, six months in a Cambodian town, then a year of writing in the Finnish wilderness”

APPLY FOR IT! Competition in single or low double digits.

Nobody else will, and it keeps you in circulation in academia; nothing looks worse than a gap on the CV, and anything beyond a year or so after PhD is generally fatal

Especially promising here are postdocs that will for part of them take you to countries in the Global South, or postdocs in very “non-Western” countries (e.g. Japan, South Korea) that accept/encourage non-speakers (few will apply!)
The Research Proposal

- 1) Give some background, wow them, importance, dramatic, scope, scale, crucial, numbers, etc.
- 2) Quick outline of what you will do, how, and outcomes.
- 3) Literature review, background, gap in research.
- 4) Methodology (more detail is better).
- 5) Anticipated academic outcomes, importance.
- 6) Anticipated non-academic outcomes, importance*.
- 7) Career development*.

*only if explicitly asked for, and the right country.
The other crucial thing you submit is your CV.

- **Papers**: for #1 you want 1+, for #2/#3 you want 2+. “Under Review” or more is acceptable. Be strategic on journals.
- **Book**: ideally a contract; not needed for #1, great for #2.
- **Conferences**: the more the better. Spend your own money?
- **Teaching**: courses, level, responsibilities.
- **Avoid**: minor things that “flesh out” your CV. For your first postdoc, you want your degrees, publications, conference talks, teaching, and service if you have it. That’s it. Less is more, and shows you’re confident in what you bring.
Non-Academic Experience

- Showing you have experience in your field outside academia can be good, but should be careful and rare.
- E.g. – I research games, and I also program games, write freelance for games magazines, and used to be a professional gamer (all very relevant).
- However, if your non-academic experience is “minor”, it is better to leave it out entirely to avoid “padding”.
- At best, though, this shows that you care deeply about your field, it’s not just a job, you are likely already “known” in the area, you bring unique knowledge, etc.
Referees

- Your PhD supervisor, unless a good reason not to.
- Internal and examiners are both good choices.
- If possible, secure someone famous/from top-tier institution who has seen your work, or who proof-read your paper; they know less about you, but they bring a lot of kudos.
- Be aware of reference-writing differences across countries!
- You will generally need to chase them up, so develop a repertoire of nice ways to say “hurry up!”.
- Guide your reference writers to particular emphases for particular jobs.
Interview

- Some postdocs come with an interview, some don’t
- This depends entirely on country, institution, the nature of the postdoc, the nature of the funding body, etc
- If they do come with an interview…
- …research who will be on your panel (your would-be supervisor should help)
- Find the links between your work and their work
- Be confident and approachable – your quality of work got you to this point, now they want to see whether or not they want you in the office two doors down
General Tips

- Apply to everything you fit (in every country…?)
- Read closely, always write to the job.
- Don’t be disheartened: although there is long-term skill (best candidates = most offers), there is huge short-term luck involved here, and you have to apply to so many that the luck evens out.
  - In one postdoc I came 1/350, in another I came 2/2...
- People who know nothing about your field will read the application, so make the importance clear.
- Get lots of feedback from people as often as you can, and encourage them to be brutal and honest.
In Conclusion…

- Postdocs are very hard to get.
- But: I finished my PhD with precisely 0 publications (near-death ill health) but, two years after, found myself with more postdoc offers than I knew what to do with.
- It can be done, but it requires a lot of time, a lot of effort, and a lot of strategic planning to maximise your chance of success in every application.
- It also means if you aren’t publishing yet, you need to start publishing right now, and build a unique research agenda.

- Any more questions? Thanks for listening! @mrj_games