



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

Dr Mark R Johnson, Killam Postdoctoral Fellow,
Department of Political Science



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 dozen of PhD students per available postdoc, maybe more: **so how do you get one?**

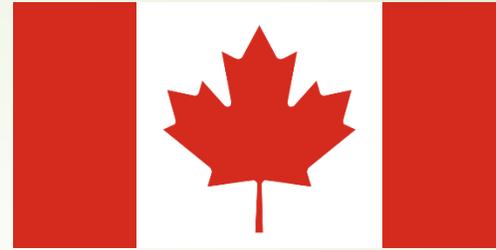


Introduction



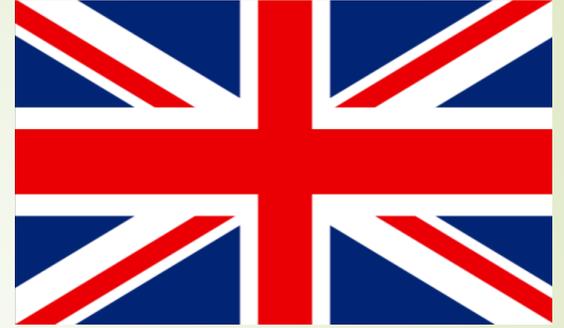
- ▶ I finished my doctorate two years ago, and subsequently did one postdoc for 18 months, another for 6 months, and now this one for 6 months (and counting).
- ▶ In the process, I applied to a total of 33 postdocs, all with custom hand-crafted research proposals between 1,000, and 10,000 (!) words...
- ▶ 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



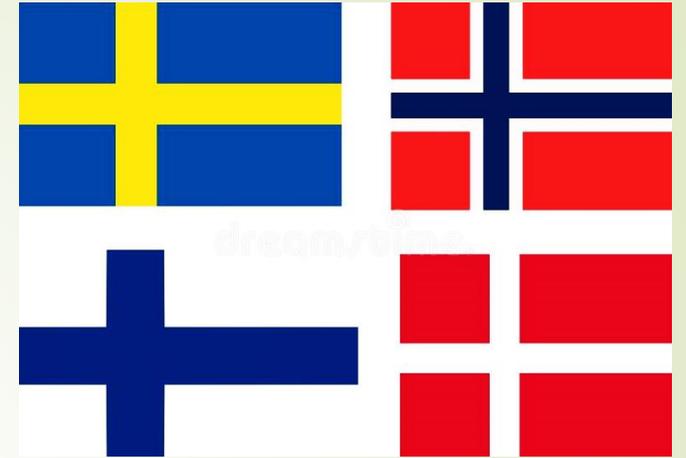
- The UK is probably the #2 nation for academia.
- Funding is drying up somewhat in light of recent events, but still lots to be had from various sources.
- **Do:** stress public visibility, the potential for *policy* impact, the potential for “everyday” impact, the reputations of the journals you published 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



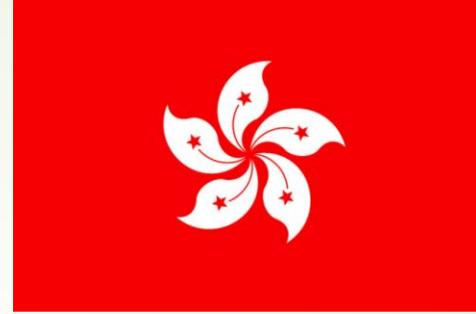
- The “strongest” academic country outside the UK in Europe is perhaps Germany, several world top 100 Universities.
- However, German academia is quite conservative, and particular fields dominate over all others.
- **Do:** pitch a project on medieval theology, not modern technology; focus on fields 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.

Different Countries



- 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.



CV Strength



- 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](#)