

International Academic Life

Cultural differences, visa & immigration for international academics

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Roadmap

1. The same job title means different things. Academic systems across countries
2. Right to work on the job market. What to put on your CV and how to signal where you want to be
3. The practical layer. Visa routes, timelines, dependants, and the admin nobody warns you about
4. Everyday life abroad. Cultural norms, social isolation, and building a life outside the department

The Same Job Title Means Different Things

The Same Words, Different Jobs

- Tenure track is not only a US thing. Ireland, the UK, and parts of Europe run tenure-like posts with a probationary review. My Irish post is effectively tenure track.
- Some systems adopt US titles on purpose, to compete for an international pool.
- Fixed-term is not adjuncting. A fixed-term post is salaried, with benefits and the same duties as permanent colleagues. The US analogue is a Visiting Assistant Professor or a postdoc, not an adjunct paid per course.
- The vocabulary: fixed-term, open-ended (probation, no end date), tenure track (formal case at the end), NTT (separate ladder), adjunct (per course, US).

What Things Are Called

Stage	US	UK	Europe (German example)
Postdoctoral	Postdoctoral Fellow	Research Fellow / Associate	Postdoc, or a named fellowship
Entry, permanent	Assistant Professor (TT)	Lecturer, or Assistant Prof.	Juniorprofessor (W1)
Mid	Associate Professor	Senior Lecturer	Professor (W2)
Research distinction	no equivalent	**Reader**	no equivalent
Senior	Professor	Professor / Chair	Professor (W3), with a Chair
Contingent teaching	Adjunct, per course	Teaching Fellow, fixed-term	Lecturer, Dozent

Fellowship means almost nothing on its own in Europe. It can be a grant-funded postdoc, a research-only post, or a teaching job. Ask what it is attached to and whether it leads anywhere.

A German Chair (Lehrstuhl, W3) is a unit with its own budget and staff, not just a title. The ladder is also discontinuous: you usually win a professorship elsewhere rather than being promoted into one.

What Counts for Promotion

North America:

- Publications carry most of the weight
- Grants help, but are rarely a formal requirement outside the sciences
- Service expectations grow after tenure

UK, Ireland, and Europe:

- Grant income can be a hard criterion, named in the rubric
- Teaching qualifications are often expected
- PhD supervision counts as its own category
- Service and admin land on you early, often in year one

Ask to see the promotion criteria before you accept.

Money and the Fine Print

- Scales are fixed, but the entry point often is not. Prior postdoc years are the usual argument for starting higher.
- **Negotiate your salary point.** Less common outside North America, but a polite, reasoned ask rarely offends.
- **Negotiate relocation money too.** It exists almost everywhere and goes unclaimed. Ask what it covers.
- Pensions rarely travel. Ask about vesting, and whether contributions refund if you leave.
- Compare the whole package: healthcare, leave, parental leave, research allowance.

Right to Work on the Job Market

Sponsorship Is Rarely the Obstacle

- Almost every university post can sponsor a visa. Large institutions hold a licence as a matter of course.
- The cost that bites is travel. What departments hesitate over is spending money to fly you out for an interview.
- So candidates get quietly filtered on airfare, not immigration status. Nobody will say this to you.
- Make travel easy to say yes to: offer to interview online, or say where you can fly out from cheaply.

Putting Citizenship and Right to Work on Your CV

- **Where it goes:** I put mine at the end of the CV, with a note on where I can fly out from. A header line works too.
- **Wording:** "Citizenship: EU and US. Eligible to work in both without sponsorship. Available to travel from Dublin or London."
- **Dual nationals:** list all of them. Each one opens a labour market.
- **Also list:** settled status, permanent residency, Stamp 4, green card, partner-derived work permission.
- **Do not volunteer:** date of birth, marital status, photo. Expected in some countries, harmful in North America.

Signalling Where You Want to Be

- Committees quietly discount candidates they assume will never move, or will leave within two years.
- Say it in the cover letter. One sentence on why this country or region fits your plans.
- Name any concrete tie: family nearby, a language, prior fieldwork, a partner already there. These read as stability.
- Be explicit about where you can fly out from. Committees cannot infer it from a CV.

Geographic keenness is information they want and cannot ask for.

The Main Routes

United States:

- H-1B, employer sponsored, lottery based outside universities
- J-1 for postdocs, watch the two-year home residency rule
- O-1 for extraordinary ability, no lottery
- Residency via EB-1 or the EB-2 waiver

UK and EU:

- UK Global Talent, held by you and taken between jobs
- UK Skilled Worker, tied to one employer
- EU Blue Card and hosting agreements, rules vary by state
- EU citizens move freely

Sponsored routes tie you to the job. Talent routes travel with you.

Go for Global Talent Early

- Heading to the UK with publications? Apply for Global Talent rather than defaulting to Skilled Worker. Academics are explicitly in scope, including early career.
- It is not tied to your employer. You can change jobs, go part time, or be between contracts without your status collapsing.
- Skilled Worker ties your right to be there to one post. If the grant does not renew, the clock starts immediately.
- Already on Skilled Worker? Switch as soon as you qualify, and start collecting endorsement evidence a year ahead.

The Practical Layer

Questions to Ask HR Before You Sign

- **Ask about dependants.** Fees per person per year, partner work rights, income thresholds, and what the institution covers. This matters more every year as rules tighten.
- Who pays for priority processing if a renewal runs late, and from which budget?
- What happens to my status if the grant does not renew, or if I take parental leave during probation?
- Get it in writing. A search chair's assurance does not bind HR.

Timelines, Renewals, and Who Pays

- The offer is not the start. Paperwork, application, biometrics, decision, and a right-to-work check all come first. Budget two to four months.
- You often cannot start work before the visa is issued, even remotely, even unpaid. Departments do not always know this.
- Renewals are the dangerous part, not the first visa. If your status rests on a contract that rests on a grant, every cycle is a near miss.
- **This happened to me.** My renewal was tied to a postdoc grant renewing, and it came close more than once. The university expected me to pay the priority fee myself. I pushed, and it came out of the grant.
- Push back on fees. Priority processing, dependant fees, and legal costs can often go on a grant or school budget. Someone has to ask.

Dependants, Partners, and Family

- Partner work rights vary sharply. Some dependant visas allow full-time work, some prohibit it, and some allow it only after a waiting period.
- Unmarried partners are recognised in some systems and invisible in others. Check what evidence of a relationship is required, and start gathering it early.
- Dependant fees add up fast and are usually per person, per year. This is a legitimate thing to negotiate into an offer.
- Childcare, school places, and enrolment deadlines often run on a calendar that does not match the academic year.
- Elderly parents and care obligations at a distance shape which offers are liveable. That is a legitimate factor, not a weakness.

The First Two Weeks

- **Get a local phone number on day one.** Huge amounts of bureaucracy quietly require a domestic mobile, and foreign numbers get rejected by forms and portals.
- An eSIM makes this painless. I use Lyca Mobile in each country for a cheap local number. I have run a UK and an Irish one at once.
- Apply for the national number immediately: PPS, National Insurance, or SSN. Payroll, healthcare, and tax all wait on it.
- **Revolut solves the opening move.** A local IBAN without a local address, so you can be paid and pay rent while the bank queue drags.

Proving You Exist

- **Get a letter of confirmation.** On letterhead, with salary, start date, and that the post is open-ended. Landlords and lenders will ask for it.
- **Watch the word "probationary".** Lenders and landlords can read tenure track as a temporary contract. Ask HR to word it as permanent, subject to probation.
- **Credit history does not cross borders.** Expect to start close to zero in each new country.
- Build a file in each country: a small direct debit, a phone contract, a card you pay off monthly.
- Keep every immigration document, entry stamp, and payslip. Settlement applications ask for them years later.

The Long Game

- Settlement clocks are strict. Five years of continuous residence is a common threshold, and absence limits (often around 180 days a year) are enforced.
- Long fieldwork, a sabbatical abroad, or a visiting fellowship can break continuous residence. Check before you commit to the trip.
- Changing employer can reset an employer-tied clock. Talent and researcher routes are usually more forgiving.
- Keep entry and exit records yourself. Border systems are not always complete and the burden of proof is on you.
- Citizenship, where you can get it, is the end of the visa problem and the beginning of a much easier career.

Everyday Life Abroad

Cultural Norms in the Department

- Directness is calibrated differently. What reads as efficient in one system reads as rude in another, and British understatement can hide a serious objection.
- Self-promotion norms differ. US culture rewards stating your contribution plainly. Elsewhere the same sentence reads as arrogance.
- Hierarchy is not always visible. Some departments are flat in tone and steep in practice. Watch who speaks first.
- Ask a friendly colleague to translate the local norms. Most people are glad to explain.

Seminar Culture and Being Read as Foreign

Seminar and feedback culture:

- Q&A can be adversarial by convention, not by hostility
- Silence can mean disagreement rather than assent
- Written feedback norms differ from spoken ones

The compounding problem:

- Being foreign, junior, and a woman stack on each other
- Accent bias in teaching evaluations is well documented
- Being mistaken for a student is routine
- Find the other international women in your institution early

Almost none of this is about you. Naming it out loud with peers helps.

The Part Nobody Schedules Time For

- Moving for a job means arriving with one social network, and it is your department. That is fragile, and it makes work problems feel like life problems.
- The loneliness usually lands three to six months in, once the novelty fades. This is normal and not a sign you chose wrong.
- Colleagues with partners and children are friendly at work and busy at weekends. Do not read that as rejection.
- Build one circle outside academia. It protects you when a paper is rejected or probation gets stressful.

Ways In

Apps and organised groups:

- Meetup for hobby, language, and hiking groups
- Bumble BFF for one-to-one friendships
- InterNations and city expat groups
- Parkrun and weekly gym classes

Local and rooted:

- Language classes, even if you speak it
- Local sports clubs (GAA, hillwalking)
- Choirs, book clubs, climbing, pottery
- Volunteering, and staff networks

Recurring beats one-off. Friendship comes from repeated exposure.

Making It Stick

- Expat groups are a bridge, not a destination. The fastest way to meet people who understand the move, and the easiest way to spend three years never meeting anyone local.
- Say yes for the first six months, to almost everything. Filter later.
- Commit to something weekly. Ad hoc plans die when work gets busy, and work is always busy.
- Learn the language even where you do not need it. It changes how people treat you.
- Plan visits home and visits from home in advance.

Staying Visible in Two Places

- Moving abroad quietly removes you from your home-country field. Conferences, letter writers, and networks all thin out.
- Keep going to one anchor conference in your original field, even when local ones are cheaper.
- Funding eligibility changes with your address. Moving into the EU opens ERC and Marie Curie. Moving out closes them.
- Time zones make collaboration harder than anyone admits. Protect one overlapping window a week.

What I Would Do Differently

- **What surprised me:** the food. Everyday ingredients, and what a supermarket assumes you cook, are not the same anywhere. Then the hidden bills, council tax in the UK above all, which nobody mentions when you are comparing salaries.
- **What I got wrong:** I did not try to integrate or make friends soon enough. Waiting made it harder, not easier.
- **What actually worked:** a stretch of deliberate isolation while I was on the job market, which protected the work, and then hobbies with the social part built in, so friendship came from showing up rather than being another project.

Takeaways

- Read the contract type and probation terms, not the title. Tenure track exists well outside the US.
- Negotiate. Salary point, relocation budget, and visa fees are all more negotiable than the silence suggests.
- UK with publications? Go for Global Talent over Skilled Worker, and switch as soon as you can.
- Local phone number, national number, and Revolut in week one. A university letter that avoids “temporary”.
- Build one circle outside the department in the first six months.

Questions?