Getting an Academic Job

Why, what, when and how?

Matthew Colless
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – WHY?

First ask yourself “WHY?” What is your motivation?

Some WRONG answers...

“It’s what comes next”
“[I don’t know what else to do”

Some RIGHT answers...

“I love doing research and have some really exciting plans!”
“I really enjoy teaching and supervising students!”

Bottom line: you should only become an academic if you are passionate about research and/or teaching – otherwise, find a job you enjoy and that pays better!
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – WHAT?

- What sort of academic job do you want?

- Different types of academic jobs...
  - University academics: research and teaching
  - Non-university academics (e.g. CSIRO, AAO): research and functional duties (wide variety of these)

- Pros and cons for both types...
  - Trade-offs between teaching (undergraduate and graduate) and functional duties (e.g. observatory support)
  - Talk to people doing both sorts of jobs to get their experience
  - Match up the nature of the job with your interests
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – WHERE?

Where do you want a job?

Big question...

Go to a smaller/less prestigious institution? ‘Big fish in a small pond’ can be a very good strategy for growing a career.

Aim for a bigger/more prestigious institution? Kudos counts for your career and for getting resources (grants, students).

Other factors...

Work with particular person? Access to particular facilities?

Willing to live long-term overseas? Or want to be in Oz?

What about family commitments? (partner’s job, kids’ schools)
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – WHEN?

When is the best time to take an academic job?

Too early in your career and...
- Not enough experience, contacts/networks, publications, etc.
- May have to settle for less than your ideal job & become stuck because opportunities are limited (e.g. too much teaching)

Too late in your career...
- If you wait for the perfect job or are unwilling to teach, or to work at a less prestigious institution, you can miss out
- After a certain point you become less marketable and may end up a perpetual postdoc or taking a job outside academia

Finding the ‘Goldilocks’ moment...
- Strong track record and plenty of potential; high-impact achievement(s)
- Get your ideal position (or at least a good base camp for the ascent!)
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – HOW?

Basic requirement: a strong research track record

No substitute for research achievement, though the details can vary considerably – usually this means a good long-term publication/citation record, but it can be a single ‘hit’ publication or discovery, or expertise valued by a particular institution...

Other valuable qualities...

Teaching experience – get some, somehow; both lecturing and supervision experience are important (even a qualification)

Functional skills – for non-university jobs, specialist skills may be critical (e.g. instrument scientist, project manager, etc.)

Grants, awards, networks, cross-disciplinary expertise, etc.
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – HOW?

▸ Presentation counts for more than it should!

▸ Make sure your CV presents you in the best (truthful!) light – include everything that might be relevant

▸ Develop an imaginative and well-thought-out research plan – get your colleagues to critique it and revise it until it’s great

▸ Eminent international referees are good, but best are referees who are really knowledgeable & enthusiastic about your work

▸ If you get an interview, prepare for it! Think about how you will answer the questions (which are usually pretty standard); be informed about the institution; have a positive plan

▸ Above all, sell yourself – give them reasons to hire you!
GETTING AN ACADEMIC JOB – HOW?

Other tips...

Use your supervisor’s, advisors’ and mentors’ networks – there are more active ways of finding a job than responding to advertisements; sometimes you can even create a job...

Optimism is a far more efficacious attitude than realism: apply for jobs you privately think you are not quite qualified for

Only apply for jobs that you want – but be open-minded about what is interesting and acceptable

Keep in mind that getting a job is a stochastic process, so adopt Darwin’s motto: “it’s dogged as does it!”