

Academia and higher education

Working in the university sector offers a wide variety of professional roles from academic research and teaching to policy and HR.

Academia – a career in academic research and/or teaching – can be a stimulating career option, with the potential for significant autonomy and flexibility in your working life. It is a challenging route that demands commitment to your area of research and to producing the publications, grant applications and projects expected by university departments. Competition for roles often means several years of insecurity through fixed-term contracts before finding a permanent position.

It is near essential to have a DPhil/PhD in order to gain a permanent academic position in the UK and many other countries, though a small number of fixed-term research-assistant or technician roles for Masters graduates do exist. Following a DPhil/PhD, next steps include a postdoctoral research position or a fixed-term teaching contract; in some subjects it may be possible to move directly into a junior lectureship. Independent fellowships offer a grant to develop your own research, so attract many applicants. Postdocs, fellowships, assistant and technical roles may last from six months to several years.

Early career academics often take on a variety of roles as stepping stones to a permanent position, or towards a 'portfolio career' with academic work conducted alongside one of several strands such as consultancy, editorial or advisory work. Permanent lectureship roles combine research and teaching with administration duties, such as

organising seminars and committee work. There are very few permanent teaching or research-only academic roles.

Professional support roles in universities typically offer a stimulating range of activities, including opportunities to develop policy and interact with academics engaged in cutting-edge research. The range of specialisms extends from HR legal and finance roles through to research and teaching support, libraries, catering, fundraising, publicity and more. These roles often offer greater stability than an academic pathway.

Getting in and entry points

For academic roles: Postdoc positions are advertised year-round (check research group websites, social media, and academic jobs boards such as www.jobs.ac.uk). Fellowship deadlines can be advertised up to one year before they start (check research funders' websites and follow their newsletters and social media). Junior research fellowships – most offered at Oxford and Cambridge – are highly competitive, and are advertised year-round, with many open between February and April. Lectureships are advertised year-round for the UK (though often in line with the academic cycle) and from September to December for North America. Contacts made through networking during your DPhil/PhD can share new positions as they become available and also provide advice on your applications.



For professional support roles: jobs appear throughout the year, and are advertised on jobs boards such as jobs.ac.uk, as well as on university vacancies pages. Many research-support positions (e.g. research assistant and technician roles) can also be advertised on research group webpages and social media. For roles such as admissions and outreach, recent student experience is advantageous, though opportunities to move into professional roles extend from entry-level to the most senior positions.

Extra-curricular ideas

For an academic pathway:

- Before doing a DPhil/PhD, gain experience by supporting research in some way. Ask academics in your field how you might assist on research projects they or others are running, or get tutoring or teaching experience with any age group.
- During a DPhil/PhD, get university teaching experience or tutor on school-focused education programme such as The Brilliant Club.
- Start building a network around your area of interest. Join relevant societies, and attend Careers Service talks on developing a professional network within academia.
- Get your work out there; submit articles for publication and help with outreach events.
- Speak at conferences, or support/lead the organisation of one yourself.
- Apply for internships with non-UK universities and/or industry to gain international and practical experience, for example, those offered by the Careers Service.

For professional support roles:

- During your studies, get involved in extracurricular activities in your department or college.
- Search the professional, managerial and support roles advertised on www.jobs.ac.uk to identify roles of interest. Most professional-support functions are filled by university graduates.

Next steps

www.careers.ox.ac.uk/academia

www.careers.ox.ac.uk/researchers

Alumni profile

Dr Lena Rose

What: I am an anthropologist by training - my research is situated at the intersection of migration, law, and religion. My work examines the tension between power, culture, and religion in asylum processes of converts to Christianity in Europe, through ethnographic observation of court proceedings, interviews, and case law analysis. In my doctorate, I conducted research among a Christian minority in the Middle East to understand how they navigated their belonging to, and also shaped, 'global Christianity'. I have published my work widely, provided expert opinions on BBC Radio 4, and am currently preparing my first monograph.

Career path: My career path has crossed a number of disciplines. I funded my DPhil through various scholarships and lots of work as a research assistant, which took longer but added valuable research experience. I was awarded a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship straight out of my DPhil, which has allowed me to expand my research.

Pros: If you are passionate about your subject, being an academic is extremely stimulating; you get to teach bright students, interact with international colleagues, have time to read, think, write, and design projects at the forefront of your field, and, depending on your area, translate results into real world impact. I particularly like my periods of immersive ethnographic research which allow me to experience different life-worlds and deeply challenge my thinking and perceptions.

Cons: The financial return and long-term job security don't necessarily reflect the high level at which you work, nor what you may have invested into your education and development. This is generally true for the first ten years post PhD.

Top tips/advice: Create a network of academics who share your research interests from an early stage – present at relevant conferences, publish in and beyond academia, and don't be shy to reach out to scholars whose work you like; Twitter is a great tool.



Position

Lecturer, University of Konstanz (Germany).

Background

Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Law Faculty at Oxford, 2019–2022; DPhil Social and Cultural Anthropology, St Cross College, 2013–2019; MSc Migration Studies, Kellogg College, 2012–2013.

Alumni profile

Oliver Hedges

What: I started working for the University of Oxford a year after graduating. I have been in administrative roles within the Sports Department, Medical Sciences and History of Art. I now work within Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach delivering two large outreach projects: Opportunity Oxford and Foundation Oxford. These act as bridging programmes, allowing disadvantaged students to improve their skills and potentially gain a place at Oxford which they may not otherwise receive. It is incredibly rewarding to organise events and projects that help others have the university experience that I enjoyed.

Why: After university I started applying for graduate schemes. It was only part-way through this process that I realised that this was not the life, nor were these the careers, that I wanted. I started my first job in the Sports Department almost accidentally; a friend recommended I apply for a sabbatical sports position. During that year-long contract I realised that I wanted to stay within the university environment, and within Oxford. Since then, I have moved between departments regularly, and have discovered just how varied and interesting working at a Higher Education institution can be. There is such a wide range of roles and skills needed that every job has felt fresh. I personally really enjoy project and event management and have been able to take positions that allow me to explore these areas further.

Advice: Be open to the different roles and careers you can have after leaving Oxford. Do not just focus on the 'traditional' Oxford career paths, as you may overlook something more enjoyable. You also do not have to settle on a career immediately after leaving Oxford. Give yourself space to explore different opportunities. Finally, when considering your career choices, you should factor in the external factors and priorities you may have, as well as the career path itself. These could include where you would work; what the work-life balance is like; and whether it is compatible with everything you want to do outside of the job.

**Position**

Major Initiatives Assistant,
Undergraduate Admissions and
Outreach, University of Oxford.

Background

BA History, New College, 2016



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