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Weighing Up the Options: The Adventure of an Academic Career Outside of the United States

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Introduction

In considering one's prospects for a career in political science within and outside of the academy, there are good reasons for looking at wider options available in terms of programs beyond those within the United States. Previous studies have attempted to address the pedagogical as well as practical reasons for studying beyond one's "home" country and have focused on added value of intercultural exchanges to one's academic career (Asada 2019). Drawing on our collective experiences, we offer some insights about pursuing academic opportunities outside the United States.

Collectively, we have found our experiences of studying and working outside of the United States have added a richness to our ways of learning, teaching, and research that is difficult to quantify. The experiences have also opened avenues of opportunities we would not have considered otherwise, through the development of more global networks. The enrichment of studying abroad at the graduate level can have a far-reaching impact on one's outlook and prospects beyond immediate considerations (Paige et al. 2009). This is something that is usually understated as it is more nebulous and doesn't demonstrate immediate impact. However, there are some key considerations and trade-offs, both short-term and long-term ones, to reflect upon before one takes the plunge. This chapter is by no means conclusive in its coverage, but more of an overview of key reflections with reference to our experiences from the United Kingdom and Spain to illustrate these insights.

Master's Level Studies Abroad

There are several key considerations for looking at an academic career outside of the United States, but a main one perhaps to reflect upon is, "What do you hope to get out of the experience?" Other top questions to consider: How long do I want to be abroad? What is the purpose of my studying? Is it to develop specialist knowledge for use in my current job? Do I want to change directions in my career? Or am I thinking about pursuing a doctoral study in political science but am unsure of what this will entail?

In terms of pursuing master's level studies in political science abroad, there are a wealth of reasons for studying abroad: international experiences, new contacts, different perspectives, regional / local specialisations, shorter time abroad, etc. However, perhaps if one is considering a master's program abroad, two key tips to consider are the duration and the focus of the programs you are shortlisting. For example, in the United Kingdom, while political science (referred to as "politics") courses can differ, most generally run for twelve-months (full-time). The difference is that some are taught courses (so specific topic courses taken along with then completing an independent research dissertation over a three or four-month period), while others are research-only courses (where you spend the entire time conduct-

ing fieldwork or research and writing to complete a dissertation). This distinction between “taught” and research-focused master’s courses are similar in Spain and with similar durations for the completion of studies. With “taught” versus research-focused programs, the route one selects is dependent on one’s reasons (building specialist-topic knowledge and methodologies versus conducting detailed research and fieldwork), along with one’s academic background at the undergraduate level, and any other work/life experiences.

In terms of the focus and types of programs available, in Spain there are master’s level programs designed for different purposes. There are non-official master’s degrees (or *Títulos Propios* in the Spanish academic jargon) that focus more on development of skills and knowledge for the professional market and are generally connected to labor opportunities. Other master’s degree programs have been developed to let those who obtain their diplomas enter doctoral studies. In comparison to Spain, most United Kingdom master’s degrees in politics serve the dual purpose of providing pathways towards professional development for those already working in policy making or business sectors, as well as a pathway for those who are interested in pursuing doctoral studies.

This understanding of how political science master’s degree courses are designed and structured is important. In the Spanish and British examples, they demonstrate how the duration, structure, and rationale for these courses are developed and the audiences they are seeking to serve. These are important points to note in programs one is looking at, as while the prestige of an institution can be very useful, decisions should also consider whether the program is a good match to what you want it for in terms of your own career path and progression. This is the case for graduate programs in any country, however, thinking ahead about opportunities specific programs have with other parts of the world can provide added value to a choice of program. A good example is the strong connection of graduate courses in Spain to universities and other organisations outside of academia in both the European Union and Latin or Ibero America. Additionally, while program-specific benefits may be clear in terms of the cultural and personal benefits, it is also useful to consider within the context of the wider university and community where you will be based during your studies and if it is a good match to more personal needs and individual identities.

A Political Science Career Outside of the United States

A second important question one author was asked during her doctoral studies in the United Kingdom, which she totally valued at the time, was “Where do you want to establish your academic career?” This is a great question in our view, as sometimes we are so focused on the political science program that we are doing, that we do not think to contemplate where do I want to be when this is done? In addition, this reflection really links decisions about completing doctoral studies abroad and future career prospects. That said, there is nothing to say studying abroad negates taking up an academic post in the United States or vice versa; only that there are contacts and networks developed during doctoral studies that can help with finding and securing first academic posts (post-doctoral researcher or teaching ones).

While we were all discussing our experiences as doctoral students in Spain and the United Kingdom, some of the key tips we thought would be useful were focused on: the duration, the quality and recognition of program, added value of programs in each that perhaps were less known, costs and funding, and personal considerations in terms of dependents and for those who identify as part of minoritized populations.

One of the contrasting points to consider between doctoral programs within the United States and Spain or the United Kingdom, for example, is the duration of programs on average. Doctoral studies in both Spain and the United Kingdom can be completed in three years (full-time) and five years (part-time). This differs vastly from the United States, where many doctoral programs on average are undertaken in five years (full-time). We draw this point to start, as there are obvious balances to be had in terms of the duration of a program, entry into the academic career market, and financial costs associated with studying abroad based on the length of program and home/international fees to be paid and living costs.

As with any doctoral program, a key consideration is the quality of degree programs. While gener-

ally United Kingdom doctoral politics degrees are highly recognized, this recognition of quality is something that has also been increasing in recent years for programs in Spain. For both Spain and the United Kingdom, the quality of its political science programs has centered around the staff within universities based on their research and teaching competencies. In Spain for instance, professors must have a clear record of recent, good quality publications and material resources must be provided to the students (such as access to books, software licences, or support for participating in international conferences or for publishing with high standards in competitive journals). Likewise in the United Kingdom, the participation of universities in both the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to assess the excellence of research undertaken by staff, as well as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to assess the quality of teaching,¹ should provide indications about the quality of programs and staff.

In today's competitive graduate market, not only where and what is studied but also how to finance it, are major considerations. One the key tips in terms of finding funding for doctoral studies abroad, in general, is to start the process early. Funding applications need time, consideration, and in many cases, referees, or nominations as part of the process. While in the United States context there are many internal university grants and awards that one can apply for, this is less the case in the United Kingdom and Spain (for a United States-focused discussion, see chapter 23). Some institutions will have their own specific funding lines, but in general, these are limited to specific programs, research topics, or there are restrictions on the nationality of applicants. In both Spain and the United Kingdom, American students can also apply for grants and scholarships within the United States that allow for their use to fund doctoral studies abroad.² Additionally, one could apply and use the American federal student loan process and send those funds to the United Kingdom or Spain to cover course fees and living costs.

In addition to the above funding streams, there are opportunities for doctoral students to undertake part-time teaching, partly to fund one's studies but also to gain valuable experience as part of one's academic training. Not dissimilar to some of the opportunities available within the United States for doctoral students, in the United Kingdom doctoral students can serve as tutors (small group seminar leaders), as a university exams invigilator, or as a part-time research assistant on projects led by a member of staff in one's department. Other considerations for working in the United Kingdom while studying include being clear about your student visa conditions, applying for and receiving a British national insurance number (like the United States social security number used to track work and tax contributions), and considering the overall impact on one's ability to complete research and writing within the expected timeframe.

Another key point when starting one's academic career (*vis-à-vis* doctoral studies abroad) is to consider the support available for international students of diverse backgrounds, in terms of ethnicity, gender identification, sexual orientation, and family-dependents needs. These considerations are becoming more integrated with increased international student recruitment. In Spanish universities this is an important dimension to consider as diversity is a key criterion for universities looking to advance their rankings. Similarly, in the United Kingdom where international students are a part of its politics departments as well as the universities, diversity and inclusion has become a part of the university landscape. In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act 2010 provides guidance for universities, staff and students about legal protections in place for those studying or working who share a protected characteristic.³

The "value added" of undertaking studies abroad, as mentioned earlier, are the cultural exchanges, experiences, and new networks one develops. Related are the number of opportunities to participate in domestic (e.g., British or Spanish-based) political science networks. For example, within the United Kingdom, political science networks such as the Political Studies Association (PSA), University Association in Contemporary European Studies (UACES), and the British International Studies Association (BISA) all have dedicated graduate student networks connected to the main organizations' bodies, but run by graduate students to provide opportunities to network and develop one's academic skills beyond research and teaching (e.g., organizing conferences, workshops, delivering conference papers and collaborative publishing). Similarly, in Spain the connections between Spanish universities and those in Latin America and across the European Union adds value to studying abroad as these guarantee strong networks for participating in exchange programs. (For the value of networking in political science generally, see chapter 7.)

When considering a future career in academia outside of the United States, the above-mentioned points and tips (e.g., intersectional considerations, legal protections, developing networks, work visas, etc.) are also relevant for securing one's first political science academic post. Something to note, many universities (including in Spain and the United Kingdom) are seeking to diversify and internationalize their programs (Ortega-Ruiz et al. 2021). They are also seeking to be more inclusive, and many are actively encouraging applications from underrepresented populations (e.g., based on age, ethnicity/race, gender, sexual orientation, disability/ablism). This is supported through provisions by governments in both Spain and United Kingdom to provide visas for non-citizen academics taking up full-time positions, as well as support for dependent families and partners accompanying them (for a more general discussion about familial obligations while in graduate school, see chapter 16).

In electing to search for an academic position outside of the United States, there are expectations of what a new academic brings in terms of teaching experience, curriculum development, research and publishing, which are like those expected by political science departments in the United States. For example, in the Spanish context there are three typical activities expected of academics: teaching (with a clear mandate of "teaching innovation"), research (with the obligation of publications mostly in English but also in Spanish), and management (such as to be the tutor of a group of students, the director of a bachelor's degree program, or a coordinator of internship programs). This is similar for those seeking positions in British universities.

Additionally, it is worth noting that external accreditation (by quality assurance agencies) for both research and teaching are becoming a part of the job-seeking process in many countries outside of the United States. In Spain, for instance, this external approval is required for career progression in the academic arena (e.g., there is no promotion without a previous accreditation). External accreditation is used to evaluate the quality of the research, with university teachers evaluated every six years on the quality of their publication profiles. Impact of one's publication-research profile is reviewed within the Journal Citation Reports (JCR),⁴ the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR),⁵ or journals published by the Scientific Publishing Institute (SPI). Similarly, in the United Kingdom the REF is a review process of research and publications by academics. The REF assesses submissions based on three elements: quality of outputs (so similar to use of the SJR), impact beyond academia, and on the research support environment of universities and their departments. This is used to determine a department's ranking against other similar universities in terms of research output and follows a seven-year cycle with the most recent REF review taking place earlier in 2021.

Along with the external accreditation of research and publications, many universities are also seeking candidates with a formal university teaching qualification. Within the United Kingdom, this is not yet mandatory in most universities prior to the start of a position, however, it is highly desirable of candidates seeking positions. In many instances, universities are requiring new staff members to acquire fellow status through the professional membership scheme promoting excellence in higher education run by Advance Higher Education (AdvHE). The alternative is the completion of a graduate certificate in higher education program during one's probationary period.

Lastly, an important part of the decision-making process of one's career prospects is to consider the earning capacity of political science positions in universities as compared to the private, governmental, or non-governmental sectors. Within the United Kingdom, academics on average earn less than their United States counterparts (Stevens 2020). This is similar in Spain, where average salaries for political science academic positions are less attractive in comparison to places like the United States and United Kingdom. However, like the United Kingdom, Spain boasts a good system of social healthcare and education. An additional bonus for academics seeking positions in Spain is that the cost of living is less than both the United Kingdom and the United States, so this can compensate for the salary levels particularly earlier in one's career.

Conclusion

There are some key take-aways to consider when looking at studying (master's level or doctoral) and searching for political science academic jobs abroad as mentioned in this chapter. The most important

one to consider is “Why?” What is the purpose behind studying abroad and are you looking at it as a short-term experience or are you a bit more open to seeing where things lead? Leaving yourself time to reflect on these questions, as well as time for short-listing perhaps five programs you’re most interested in, is key. Secondly, look at the duration of the program to complete on average, the costs, and the types of funding available (including American federal loans) to see what is a best fit. Do remember to consider the costs of living and not just the costs of studying alone, as unlike in the United States, not all universities provide clear ideas about the costs of living associated with where the university is located. And, again, leave yourself time to do your research on grants and other “free” money that you may be able to access (e.g., home-state scholarships, grants for specific ethnic groups, grants for specific programs and/or research topics, etc.). The time these take to find and complete are usually underestimated. Third, as we will assume quality of research and teaching will be a key consideration in selecting a program, the next key consideration focuses on the extra-curricular opportunities available that will add value to the experience of studying abroad. These could be through the graduate program itself (e.g., work experiences, fieldwork, research assistant work, government internships, etc.), staff members in the department, or affiliate organizations.

All of these key take-aways that are relevant for studying abroad are also very relevant for those looking to start their political science academic career abroad. Lastly, a great tip is to find a mentor who shares your research interests, affiliations, and that you like, who will be able to provide feedback and advice as you prepare to search for that first full-time political science academic job (for additional information, see chapter 13). Good Luck!

Resources of Interest

- British International Studies Association (BISA)—United Kingdom—www.bisa.ac.uk
- London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE): Fees and Funding Opportunities—United Kingdom—<https://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/graduate/fees-and-funding>
- Office for Students: Equality and Diversity—United Kingdom—<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/equality-and-diversity/what-does-the-law-say/>
- Political Studies Association (PSA)—United Kingdom—www.psa.ac.uk
- Postgraduate Funding—United States, United Kingdom & Spain—<https://www.postgraduatefunding.com/search/results?los=1&sids=63>
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)—United Kingdom—<https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/>
- Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)—United Kingdom—<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-independent-review-of-tef>
- University Association of Contemporary European Studies (UACES)—United Kingdom—www.uaces.org
- Advance Higher Education (AdvHE)—United Kingdom—<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/>

Endnotes

- 1 Both measuring frameworks provide an evaluation of research and teaching undertaken at UK universities and in the case of the REF, this is used to inform the allocation of public funding for universities in research. The TEF is voluntary and publicly funded universities and colleges in receipt of a TEF award are allowed to charge tuition at a different level than non-TEF institutions.
- 2 Further details of sources of funding are listed in the reference section. Also check individual institutions (e.g., LSE – London School of Economics and Political Science in the UK) for details of individual institutional funding available. See also chapter 23 in this volume.
- 3 Protected characteristics under UK law include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- 4 Journal report service that measures journal impact factor: <https://clarivate.com/webofsciencelibrary/solutions/journal-citation-reports/>

- 5 Public portal that compares journal and country rankings for impact factor: <https://www.scimagojr.com/>

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