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Is the grass greener on the other side of the world? Six individuals share the ups and the downs they have experienced in university life abroad

One of the delights of an academic career is the opportunity to spend significant stretches of time – or entire careers – in desirable foreign climes. But academic exile also brings obvious challenges relating to language, culture and distance from family, friends and established academic networks.

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We asked six academics who have switched countries to describe their experiences. Their stories confirm that life at universities abroad can be trying. UK academics in Italy and Finland complain of being treated as second-class citizens in systems apparently set up to favour home-grown talent. Meanwhile, an associate professor who came to the UK from the US is haunted by doubts over whether the literal Utopia of his existence between two “equally admirable and deficient” cultures can be justified given his expanding carbon footprint as a result of all the air miles involved.

But there are also many positives. While **Hong Kong** may no longer be the Mecca for indolent Anglo gin-swillers, its cultural fascinations still provide a strong allure for one contributor. For a new vice-chancellor, the challenge of keeping up with the pace of political and policy change in Australia is proving a compelling distraction from the stunning beaches. And, for an early career academic, New Zealand has turned out to be far from the remote academic graveyard her former colleagues had conjured up.

It seems that whatever voyage you take, it is likely to be one of discovery.

Hong Kong

Fragrant with possibilities

Arriving from London in early 1997 at the University of **Hong Kong**, I found myself swimming against a tide of deserting expats. It was the time of the handover: diehard colonials were digging in, and Brit-bashing was in full swing. The acronym “Filth” re-emerged: “Failed in London, try **Hong Kong**”. The signs didn’t bode well.

But as a **Chinese** flag was unfurled on the colonial buildings of the university the day after the reunification with the motherland, I reflected that this was still the right place for a lecturer in post-colonial studies and postmodernism. Postmodern heterotopias are everywhere: shopping malls and themed bars pretending to be somewhere – or some time – else; soaring Western-style office blocks cheek by jowl with local stores crammed with dried fish, noodles and traditional **Chinese** medicines; and street markets offering antiques, fake designer watches, sex toys, fancy dress, birds and snakes – just like in the film Bladerunner.

The university, like the city, has lacked direction and vision since 1997. Inevitable convergence with Beijing shapes all futures. Local resentment towards mainlanders can flare up against tourists (“locusts”, whose children pee on the subway trains) and parallel traders (who **buy** up all the foreign baby-**milk** formula to take back and sell to **Chinese** worried about possible contamination in domestic products). Ideological differences also exist (mainlanders still understand ideology). And there will be plenty of cause for future tension if the University of **Hong Kong** loses its international standing by focusing too much on **Chinese** studies and increasing its quota of mainland students.

The first post-handover vice-chancellor was on a mission to rid the senior common room of gin-soaked Brits and to encourage everyone into the office early by reducing the number of parking places. He showed his colours and met his nemesis when trying to ban a social sciences survey on the government's popularity. During his replacement's watch, student protesters were locked in a stairwell to keep them away from visiting Beijing VIPs. The new vice-chancellor, Peter Mathieson, is from the UK. One **Hong Kong** professor told the press that he was "ignorant and incapable", but he seems very capable of rebuffing such criticism.

The post-handover administration's ineptitude in all things bar squeezing money out of thin air and land sales is remarkable. Meanwhile, the university bumbles along, its outdated committee structures concealing the fact that only a few individuals wield genuine power – just like in colonial times. But if you don't rock the boat, **Hong Kong** is a great place to work and I have enjoyed my stay. The facilities at the university are excellent, and the teaching load is not onerous: I have written five books and 30 articles and chapters while here and I spend most summers in the British Library.

English is the medium of instruction in the university, but many students lack sufficient grasp of it for serious tertiary education. Students and staff use Cantonese or Putonghua outside the classroom – and often inside it. But the top 20 per cent of my students in English literature would do well in UK or US universities and most are a delight to teach.

Academic salaries are high (from 50 to 100 per cent higher than those in the UK) and income tax is low (15 per cent). Western food is expensive, but clothes and transport are cheap. Entertainment is patchy – international festivals create feast and famine. Housing is the major concern in this landlord economy. A spacious flat in the most sought-after areas might cost all of a professor's salary, but there are cheaper alternatives. I have a four-bedroom house with a Balinese garden on Lamma Island. This is a friendly, very cosmopolitan place with cafes where people write books and discuss philosophy. It's also on the mainlanders' tourist trail, so Westerners are objects of the tourist gaze for a change.

In the New Territories and Outlying Islands, country parks are extensive, with hiking trails and empty beaches. These become crowded on public holidays, especially "grave cleaning" days, when burnt offerings at the ancestors' remains can cause hill fires. If you don't suffer from biophobia (many here do), there is a surprising range of wildlife, including kites, huge butterflies, flowering trees, dog-eating pythons, cobras and wild boar. All this is a welcome refuge from worsening pollution in a city that cries out for a traffic-free zone, bike rentals and electric trams (already here, albeit ignored and obstructed for decades) but gets only more six-lane highways. This is a property- and construction-based economy: with no profit in reducing pollution, the government just kicks the can into the long grass (so full of cans the grass doesn't grow any more).

This year I am being forced to retire at 60 – a hangover from colonial days when retirees with a fat pension booked their passage home on a Cunard liner. The age limit was kept, but the passage and the pension scrapped. With no universal state pension, many old people here live in poverty. Alongside the pollution, this is wealthy **Hong Kong**'s other disgrace. It is a great place to work, but best to get out before you get old.

Paul Smethurst is associate professor in the School of English at the University of **Hong Kong**. His books include The Postmodern Chronotope (2000) and Travel Writing and the Natural World (2013).

New Zealand

Oceanic openness and intellectual vibrancy

When I told colleagues at the University of Edinburgh in 2011 that I had a job in Auckland, the most common response was one of surprise tinged with misgiving. Did New Zealand even have universities, some asked. How would I cope with living in "the back of beyond"? One colleague voiced concern that I was compromising my scholarly career by moving to a location that was so far removed geographically from the "central" hub of academia that is Europe and North America.

I had never even visited New Zealand before, so moving here from Edinburgh – where I had spent three years as an adjunct teaching fellow – was also a step into the unknown for me personally. It was made a little easier by the fact that my partner is a Kiwi who was forever extolling her homeland, so I was keen to see if everything she'd told me about the place was true.

For all my former colleagues' well-meaning concerns, life can be incredibly enriching for academics working in this Antipodean corner of the world. Professionally, I have been delighted to discover that I am located in the midst of a vibrant research arena built up and sustained by academics within Oceania, where scholarship (at least in my field of religious studies and cultural studies) is constantly being reimagined and pushed to new limits. Perhaps this is precisely because we are far removed from the rather traditional northern hemisphere academic headquarters: the apron strings being, by necessity, long and loose, we

enjoy a little more freedom to be creative in our scholarly endeavours. That said, there are still many opportunities for collaboration with international peers. I attend overseas conferences and am currently working on several research projects with academics in Australia and the UK. All in all, I've found that my geographical location is by no means a hindrance to my scholarly life or career.

One thing I have noticed about higher education in New Zealand is that there is a much more informal environment in universities, both in and out of the classroom. In my faculty at least, students typically address lecturers by their first name from the get-go, regardless of rank. Some of my Kiwi colleagues and students thought it was hilarious when I told them that, at my alma mater, first-name terms between student and lecturer were strictly by (academic) invitation only.

This levelling informality also shapes the classroom experience. Students here are more eager to engage with the lecturer, to ask questions and to offer their own opinions, rather than treating the lecturer's every word as sacrosanct. Consequently, my teaching style has flourished, evolving from carefully prepared monologues to more open-ended (and intellectually challenging) dialogues, in which the learning experience often goes both ways.

So, professionally, my time in New Zealand has been very rewarding – despite the fact that, like their UK counterparts, New Zealand universities are suffering serious financial cuts at the hands of an unsympathetic government.

Personally, it's also been rather good. Living in Auckland – the city of sails – I have three beautiful beaches (as well as numerous dormant volcanoes) within walking distance of my house. I can watch the sun rise over the Pacific Ocean on my ferry ride to work every morning. The winters are mild, the summers are balmy, and, while the cost of living can sometimes take your breath away, I'd like to think I'll be living and working here for some time to come.

Caroline Blyth is a lecturer in the Hebrew Bible and Hebrew language at the University of Auckland.

Finland

Warm welcome, then cold shoulder

I did my PhD in urban geography at the University of Strathclyde and had been lecturing there for more than three years before I accepted my postdoctoral position at the University of Helsinki in December 2007. I had never been to Finland before, but the country, its people and their culture had long intrigued me. Once I had arrived in the April of the following year, I made a concerted effort to learn about Finland's history and to appreciate its culture and etiquette.

I also appreciated the space that I was given: a big corner desk in a shared office with three other researchers. I had time to work on my publications, and I received helpful tips about where to apply for funding when my two-year contract ran out. I also offered quality teaching in English, mainly to Erasmus exchange students – an experience that I enjoyed. The feedback on my teaching was generally positive, and my line manager told me that I was good for the university's ambition to "become more international". I also got positive vibes from colleagues. I felt valued.

At the start of 2009, I began making plans to become a permanent fixture in Finnish higher education. No positions were available in my faculty, but I won a year's funding from a Finnish foundation to keep me going – albeit on a lower salary. However, subsequent applications to Finnish funding bodies were unsuccessful, as were my attempts to secure a permanent academic contract. I could get only part-time teaching jobs in a variety of universities in the south of the country.

The most frustrating aspect of applying for a position in Finnish higher education is the silence. When you apply for academic posts in UK universities, you can expect to be informed about the outcome even if you are unsuccessful. Finnish universities do not work in this way. It feels as though you are hassling human resources staff when you ask them for feedback. I suggested to a Finnish colleague that this silence might be viewed as discourteous, only to be told that Finns would rather not be seen to be rejecting people.

Still without a proper contract, my Finnish partner and I thought about leaving Finland last year. But then, in December, a permanent lectureship was finally advertised in my own department, the details for which included the words "open" and "international", and I was encouraged to apply by my line manager. But again, I heard nothing for several months until one of the other candidates, based in France, sent me a copy of the official letter which stated that a Finn who had only just completed their PhD had been appointed to the post. The letter had not been translated from Finnish despite the supposedly international nature of the search. The head of department told me that no ranking of candidates existed and explained that it was "a strategic recruitment, where we hired a qualified person with strong existing ties to the research **group**".

There has been some progress in opening up the Finnish higher education system to more foreign academic talent, but it has been slow. To get a sense of the wider view, I emailed all universities in Finland and asked them for statistics about their foreign staff. The University of Turku reflects the national picture. Of its 500 academic staff currently holding permanent contracts, only 21 are not Finnish citizens and just eight have a mother tongue other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami. I have lost count of the number of brilliant foreign academics who have upped and left this supposedly fair and open Nordic country because they are made to feel belittled and marginalised by a higher education system apparently designed to guarantee that Finns progress the fastest.

Finnish colleagues have given me four different explanations for this. One is foreigners' difficulties with learning Finnish – from which I am certainly not immune. Another is that Finns trust other Finns and thus prefer to employ them. A third is that some Finns believe that they are more entitled to permanent academic contracts because it is "their" country. But the most surprising reason is that Finnish academics feel insecure and don't wish to be challenged and undermined by foreign scholars.

The most important lesson I have learned was succinctly put by Michael Ignatieff in his recent memoir Fire and Ashes: "When you live in other people's countries, you eventually bang up against glass doors and cordoned-off areas reserved for insiders. You realise you understand only what the insiders say, not what they really mean."

Gareth Rice has just finished his last part-time lecturing contract with the University of Helsinki.

United Kingdom

Midatlantic Utopia

Would you happen to have a spare rubber?" That proposition, coming at eight in the morning from a colleague in my office doorway, took a moment to process. Slowly, what she meant dawned upon me: an eraser. As our eyes registered what the other had been thinking, we managed to extract ourselves from the situation, awkwardly and bemusedly.

Perhaps you dream that if you embark on a career abroad you will help to foster international understanding. Let me offer a prophylactic: confusion is the default state. To live and work abroad will be disorienting for you and your hosts alike. If you are not fine with confusion, it really would be best to stay home, for whole departmental meetings will take place in a foreign argot: "V-C" for president, "honours" for majors, "subsid" for…well, that last item is virtually untranslatable, pointing to the entirely different structure of higher education beneath the vocabulary.

Winston Churchill described the Americans and the British as one people separated by a common language. The reality runs deeper. I arrived at the University of Nottingham four and a half years ago, in my early forties, to find myself the only American instructor in Europe's largest programme in American studies. My spouse, a librarian, has found employment. Our children attend an excellent school. We bought a red-brick house in a charming village and enjoy walking for miles in the English countryside. Yet despite it all, scarcely a day goes by without my wondering what I am doing in this country – sometimes really wondering.

Students should meet at least one American in the three years of an American studies course. Perhaps that is reason enough for me to be here. What, however, if I am no longer the same American I was before arriving? It would stretch credulity to claim that I have become an American Briton, but consider this. While on sabbatical this academic year, I had reason to fly to America four times, twice to speak at a conference, twice for archival research. Each time the wheels touched ground in the US I felt I was coming home. What was striking was that I felt precisely the same way on the return journeys.

Some years I have abstained from transatlantic flights in light of the overwhelming evidence that human-produced carbon dioxide emissions are generating global overheating. The same academic community that has revealed that reality, however, places a high value on international intellectual exchange. With air travel both censured and requisite, qualms of conscience can result for one residing in a country remote from one's primary research and key professional meetings, not to mention family. So I resist superfluous tourist flights to dip toes in the Caribbean Sea or stand on Icelandic glaciers. Even trips with good justification I try to minimise by combining them or forgoing them. For me, the days when flying produced a frisson of freedom are forever over.

British and American culture, despite their commingling, differ in infinite minute ways. To emerge among my boisterous, boastful, happy American compatriots is surreal after experiencing British restraint, propriety and indirection. But to rebound from American informality and openness back into British rigidities and pomposities of rank is equally disconcerting, even if ample compensation can be had at the bakery, the second-hand bookshop or the pub.

Surely this is Utopia, this life between two cultures equally admirable and deficient, because the literal meaning of “Utopia” is “no place”. Should we, however, trade the world for Utopia?

That, with an increasing sense of exigency, is what I am left to wonder.

Christopher Phelps is associate professor and senior lecturer in American studies at the University of Nottingham.

Australia

At the deep end, but nature compensates

Like 19th-century pioneers, the Lloyd family relocated from the Republic of Ireland to Australia. Since that move early last year, however, we have had a vastly more positive experience than did those desperate souls transported here centuries ago.

When we arrived, there was a 40°C temperature difference between Adelaide and Dublin, where I had most recently been bursar and director of strategic innovation at Trinity College. But you acclimatise pretty quickly, and the great weather and beaches of South Australia go very well together.

Not that I had much time for splashing in the surf. I was busy climbing a steep learning curve of acronyms (the formation of which is an Australian national pastime) and getting used to the considerably faster pace of decision-making required in Australian university management – especially when faced with no fewer than five different federal ministers for education in 18 months, and with state and federal elections to boot. Add to that the new government’s review of the demand-driven university system and May’s radical budget – which abolished caps on tuition fees, cut government contributions to teaching and opened up public funding to private providers and sub-degree places – and you have a pace of reform that is much faster than anything I experienced in Ireland. But I find it all extremely energising and far more liberating than challenging.

I added to my workload by launching a big review of university strategy within a few months of joining. Called Unijam, it involved 38 hours of online, global conversation with all sorts of people, from students to celebrities, politicians and alumni, and it resulted in the creation of a new, crowdsourced action plan that had **buy**-in from across the institution.

The recent abolition of price caps and the probable increase in student borrowing that this will usher in will only intensify the more businesslike focus of the economics of higher education in Australia compared with Ireland. From an operational perspective, it will demand greater differentiation among universities and management teams that are prepared to act nimbly to meet student needs and to ensure that their offerings are linked to tangible outcomes. Elements beyond the classroom will move centre stage, such as student experience, infrastructure, internships, employability and international placements and partnerships. I am going to be busy.

Internationalisation is another big area that I have had to get my head around. Whereas true internationalisation remains a goal rather than a reality for many Irish universities, higher education is Australia’s fourth largest export industry overall and the single largest service-based export. It is big **business**, and is recognised and organised as such. Barely had I touched down in Adelaide before I was flying off to **China**, putting in place articulation agreements and planning offshore campus collaborations. I have now been through Asia several times. The next trip will be in July to launch our Singapore presence.

Adelaide is very much a university city, with three domestic institutions and a number of international providers serving a metropolitan population of about 1.3 **million** people. Higher education is a key part of the economic fabric of the state of South Australia, and that plays out in terms of meaningful and frequent engagement with politicians. For instance, I was recently appointed to the state’s Economic Development **Board**, an independent advisory body that will take on increased importance amid the demise of the local automotive industry.

I’**m** still considered to be the “new” vice-chancellor, but only the accent remains to testify to this. I do miss a specific Irish blend of tea, but I am compensating as best I can. The kids are developing Aussie accents and are playing outdoors every day and having such fun. Personally, I am in absolute awe of the birds in our neighbourhood – galahs, lorikeets, cockatoos – all flying about the place in huge numbers. The Australian magpie makes the most wonderfully exotic noise to my northern hemisphere ears and makes me happy every single day.

David Lloyd is vice-chancellor and president of the University of South Australia.

Italy

Dolce vita? Rather sour, actually

I have taught at the University of Verona for 30 years. The only advice I can offer Italian students seeking a career in academia is to leave Italy. Similarly, I would advise foreign teachers and academics seeking a share of la dolce vita to think carefully before coming.

It is impossible to have a meaningful conversation about Italian universities without mentioning raccomandazioni: the systematic rigging of appointment processes to favour candidates with family friends and connections over those competing on merit alone.

Writing in Italian magazine Panorama in 1995, a former president of the Italian Senate, Marcello Pera, described it as scandalous. “The Italian university no longer exists,” he wrote. “It is dead. It has been killed by a political class that is irresponsible, guilty, short-sighted, homicidal and suicidal…To ask this political class to provide a remedy for the cemetery it has left behind is like asking the capo dei capi [godfather] to solve the Mafia problem.”

The result is so-called education run by and for the benefit of so-called educators. The net losers are the talented Italian students who are obliged to flee the country to study and work; the less fortunate ones stay despite having no realistic possibility of acquiring from an Italian university the skills that would render them employable.

My first job in Italy was managing a private language school in Padua in 1982. My Italian wife was working in Brescia, 150km away. Our daughter was born in 1983. My father came for her birth and was diagnosed in the Padua hospital with terminal cancer. He accepted his fate, and it was agreed by the doctors that he should receive palliative treatment only. As a greenhorn in Italy, I could not understand why his morphine did not arrive until a young Italian doctor asked if I was “tipping” the head nurse.

The University of Verona employed me in 1984 as a lettore (literally, a reader): a self-employed professional denied (illegally) social security and pension contributions. The contract was for one year, renewable for a maximum of five more. I taught English language and literature and was a full member of the examining boards, setting and grading both written and oral exams and working on the supervision of theses.

After working for only three weeks, I was advised to stop because the money to pay our wages had not arrived from the ministry in Rome. A strike resolved the problem. Meanwhile, my wife got a transfer to work nearer Verona, at the cost of a month’s salary in the form of a cash donation to a trade union official.

My experience is not unique. All non-Italian academics are treated this way. There have been six judgments in favour of lettori in the European Court of Justice as well as thousands of lawsuits in Italy: a veritable blizzard of Bleak Houses. Italy did change its legislation in 1995, requiring us to be given open-ended contracts in line with Italian teaching staff. But, unlike Italians, we had to accept downgraded pay and conditions as laboratory technicians. The experience led us, in 1997, to set up the Association of Foreign Lecturers in Italy to press our case for fair treatment.

Along with 13 other Verona lettori, I refused to sign the new contract. As a result, we were ordered out of the faculty offices and our names were deleted from the internal phone books and from the doors of our office. Then we were officially sacked – only being reinstated four years later by the Italian Supreme Court. We are currently working, without a contract, under the protection of that judgment.

My daughter left Italy in 2000, bitterly complaining that, with her foreign surname, fair treatment in the Italian higher education system, even as a student, would be impossible. She did her degree, instead, at Edinburgh Napier University.

Her bitterness is diminishing and she now visits Italy more frequently – seduced, as we all are, by its beauty, splendid art treasures, architecture, weather, seaside, mountains, pizzas and ice cream. But returning to her birthplace to work is still not an option she would consider.

David Petrie is a lettore at the University of Verona and chair of Allsi, the Association of Foreign Lecturers in Italy.

CO unnott : University of Nottingham

NS gedu : Education | gcat : Political/General News | guni : University/College

RE hkong : Hong Kong | china : China | adelai : Adelaide | auckl : Auckland | saustr : South Australia | uk : United Kingdom | apacz : Asia Pacific | asiaz : Asia | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | austr : Australia | bric : BRICS Countries | chinaz : Greater China | devgcoz : Emerging Market Countries | dvpcoz : Developing

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