



*Great jobs for bright people*

# **Building Academic Job Applications**

A Quick & Practical Guide for Early Career Researchers



# Introduction

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## Who is this ebook for?

**Preparing and making job applications is an important part of anyone's career development, but it is an activity that we get less consistent practice in undertaking. It can also be something done under pressure, whether that is because it is time consuming or has to be fitted in around other work or the end of a current contract.**

This resource is targeted at those at an early stage of their academic career. It has been designed to offer practical suggestions and advice to assist early career researchers as they make applications for jobs at the critical developmental stage of an academic career. Therefore if you are:

A final stage PhD applying for postdoctoral research positions and/or teaching fellowships

Or

A postdoctoral researcher/knowledge transfer/career development fellow or teaching fellow/assistant applying for an independent research/academic post as a lecturer or assistant professor.

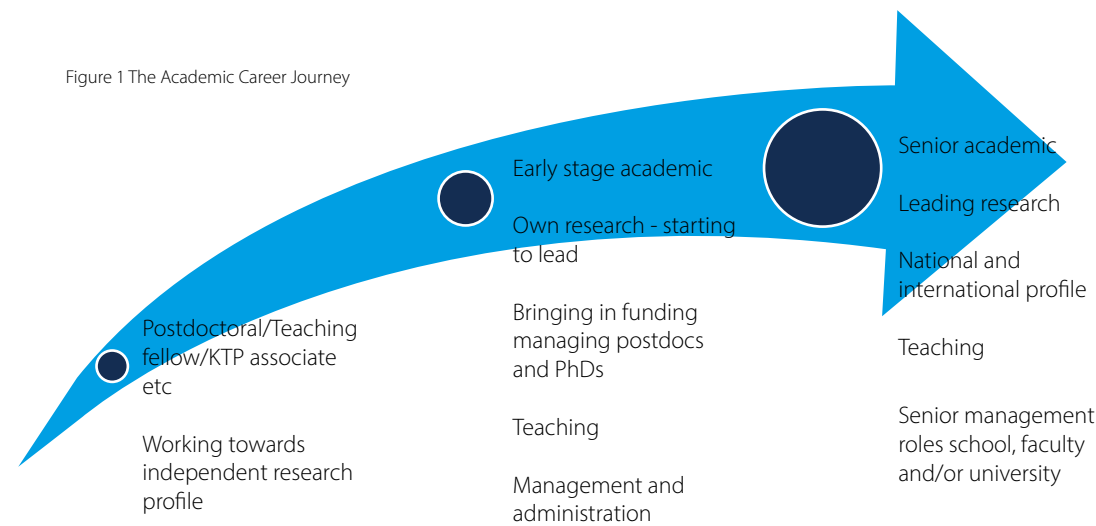
This resource may assist you in reviewing your existing application style and approach as well as providing a vehicle to assess career progress and identify a focus for further career actions.

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Figure 1 The Academic Career Journey



### Application and job market considerations (and disclaimers!)

This simplified version of the academic career pathway is used here to emphasise the growth and development expected in terms of increasing research, teaching and managerial responsibilities. There can, of course, be variations to this route, for example, a teaching led career, or organisational differences, e.g. for those working in research only institutes. Some of you using this resource may also be returning to academia having spent time in industry or other organisations. The key aspect of this graphic as it relates to building and developing applications is that application documents must LOOK FORWARD to the next level job and CONVINCE the reader(s) that an applicant should be shortlisted for interview.

1. There is no “perfect CV template” or similar for other application documents. Your colleagues may offer different opinions of what a CV/cover letter or supporting statement should contain or look like. Even Careers Advisers have differences of opinion on content, style and presentation. The suggestions offered here are based on views and comments from the author’s academic and careers adviser colleagues as well as her own experiences of providing application feedback to early career researchers for over ten years. But the application documents you submit are YOURS and you must be confident with them and be able to use them in the next stage of the process, the interview.
2. The academic job market is intensely competitive at all levels but you can only take control of your own application.
3. Shortlisting applicants to be interviewed is a serious task and taken as such by those undertaking it, but it is often a task that has to be done as part of, or in addition to, a busy working schedule.
4. The people assessing your application will be your manager, colleagues and fellow academics if you are successful. Human Resources departments have responsibility for managing the application system and processes.
5. The number of candidates invited for interview is often 4 or 5, the number of written applications to be reviewed is significantly higher. Therefore the first stage can be predicated on identifying those applications that do not meet the specified requirements for the position.

### Be realistic

The points above are important to remember when you are considering applying for a new role but you may also need to make sure that you keep a sense of realism and perspective: for instance:

1. Trying to prepare the perfect set of application documents may result in not making an application because the potential applicant is never satisfied with their CV etc.
2. Don’t use the level of competition as an excuse not to apply. Make a realistic assessment of your readiness for the next level job.
3. Begin by identifying the strengths you have for the job, the reverse often happens – individuals identify their weaknesses or lack of experience first. They will then use this as another reason not to apply for the post instead of:
  - Focussing on strengths and assessing ways of building a convincing application around these areas from your record and experience
  - Identifying areas for development or new challenges and considering how these could be addressed realistically in an application

For some of the developmental/challenge areas do you have some experience to draw on? Consider when you have been required to operate at a higher level because of a particular work situation, perhaps you have had to lead others because your group leader or Principal Investigator has been away, or you have had to step in when someone has been ill? Record these occasions and analyse these against the demands of a higher level job. You could also identify occasions when you have been involved in activities which have allowed you to develop knowledge and insights into processes or activities, for example, involvement in grant writing or patent applications. Record these as they may be useful in preparing a supporting statement or cover letter for a higher level job.

It is difficult to “second guess” the methods individual “shortlisters” will use; will they read a CV first and then other documents? Will they ignore a cover letter completely or will they read some sections of each document? I cannot answer these questions with any certainty BUT if you have built an effective and consistent set of documents focussed on the tasks, level and expectations of the next level role then once you have submitted them to the University or Institute you can do no more at this stage. So for the rest of this e-book let us concentrate on what you can control – **your documents.**





### The Academic CV – building content and career development themes

It is probably true of most of us that we tend to review our CV when we are in the process of applying for a new post. Reviewing your academic CV without the pressure of applying for a job can also be useful in assessing your career progress and identifying developments you have made and areas where you may need to focus your career actions. This process can also be useful in deciding whether or not you are ready to apply for the next level role.

Figure 1 “The Academic Career Journey” shows the increasing requirements required of a university based academic from a research specific focus to one that encompasses research leadership and independence, teaching and managerial/administrative responsibilities. Those in a research institute would not be involved in undergraduate teaching but would be taking on supervision of PhDs as would their university colleagues. They would also be expected to develop their research profile and to lead and manage.

From your PhD onwards your CV should be supporting this developing pathway and therefore it can be helpful to build and analyse your CV within the three main areas of an academic’s role and the evidence you could include:

**Research** – research conducted/impact/outputs and dissemination

**Teaching and Learning** – demonstrator/teaching assistant activities/supervision of undergraduates/masters projects/marketing/assessment and feedback

**Management/Administration/Contribution To Academic Life** – organising conferences/establishing a network/journal club or similar/outreach or ambassadorial roles/committee representation.

Building your CV within these three headings allows you to take a practical and immediate view of your CV, e.g. is it appropriate for the position you are applying for? It also allows you to evaluate your on-going career progress in terms of overall themes such as research independence, quality and impact of your research output, developing teaching and expanding your engagement with other areas of university life.

#### Career Review Activity

Check that you have a full and up to date record of all your activities in these three areas.

You may not use all the information but ensuring you have an up to date record without the pressure of meeting an application deadline may help to focus the time you do have on the areas you need to give prominence to in an application.

### The key principles of building an academic CV

#### IMMEDIATE. INTERESTING. IMPACT.

Remember that those shortlisting may be working quickly through a large number of applications. Consider following the three “I”s approach to preparing your application:

**Immediate** – traditionally there has been no page limit on an academic CV BUT you need to consider how to effectively utilise the first page, and possibly the second to make a positive start to the application

**Interesting** – are you gaining the attention of your reader by focussing on what they will be looking for? For example if the job details state the need for a “track record” of successful funding and awards your reader could have given up looking for this section or be frustrated by the time they find it on page 3 or 4 of your CV.

**Impact** – are you actively addressing the requirements of the next level position or relying on the shortlisters to interpret or make assumptions on your behalf? It may be that you will need to use other application documents to achieve some of this impact, for example, a research or teaching plan, cover letter or supporting statement. The section on moving from postdoctoral work to an independent post will offer some suggestions for these documents.

#### Be transparent

Aspects of your CV and academic career development may be dictated by research protocols or a life event. For example group publication protocols or working under an Intellectual Property embargo may have restricted your potential output. Career breaks for caring or maternity reasons also happen.

Advice from my academic colleagues is to be clear in your CV or personal statement/cover letter about such matters. Don’t let them assume, for example, that you were not interested in publishing your work. A simple line in your CV for a career break is all that is required, you do not need to add further detail or justify this:

April 2014 – 2015 Caring for elderly parents

“They should highlight this clearly on their CV so that they can be judged for the period in work. So declare it, don’t hide it.”

Regarding planned and unplanned career breaks, AGCAS Survey - Getting the first lecturing Job AGCAS Research Staff Group Dec 2014



For teaching positions there may be background information about the programmes offered and level of teaching delivery required but again background, skills and experience levels will be included. e.g.

### Building from a PhD to a first postdoctoral research/teaching position

This section is aimed at those who are in the final stages of their PhD or have submitted their thesis and/or had their viva. The posts you may be applying for could have a number of job titles e.g. Research Assistant, Research Associate, Research Fellow, Teaching Fellow.

The amount of job information available to potential applicants can vary but may include the following:

For research positions this may consist of some information about the overall research area, the research leader and team, and importantly what background, skills and experience are required for the post. e.g.

"To explore an exciting and novel way to improve the efficacy and tolerability of chemotherapy in brain tumours. This could have a significant impact on the availability and efficacy of drugs to treat patients with brain tumours.

The lab is seeking to appoint a highly motivated, dedicated and enthusiastic postdoctoral research fellow. The candidate must have completed a PhD degree in Medicinal Chemistry or Chemical Biology. Previous relevant experience in palladium chemistry, solid-phase synthesis and tissue culture is desirable. The candidate should demonstrate an ability to design, execute and interpret experiments, creative thinking, presentation skills, problem solving, initiative and critical analysis. ... which is part of the Institute of Genetics and Molecular Medicine, and offers state-of-the art technologies, collaborative research environment and access to multiple advanced services."

#### Knowledge, Skills & Experience

<p>Essential:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PhD in organic / medicinal / pharmaceutical chemistry or related discipline</li> <li>• Organic synthesis</li> <li>• Palladium chemistry</li> <li>• Pharmaceutical sciences / drug discovery</li> <li>• Mammalian tissue culture and cell viability assays</li> </ul>	<p>Desirable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solid phase synthesis</li> <li>• HPLC</li> <li>• Light and fluorescence microscopy</li> <li>• Flow cytometry</li> </ul>
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The Department seeks to appoint a Teaching Fellow to offer, in the first instance, the following modules: HIST6310: British History, 1689-c.1860. An undergraduate survey course, taught over 20 weeks through weekly lecture and tutorials HIST2302: Industrial Revolution in Britain. A thematic module taught to two groups, over 20 weeks, through two hour seminars. HIST7310: Remaking the English Ruling Class, 1600-1785. An advanced module taught over 10 weeks, once in term one and once in term two. In addition, a graduate-level module to be taught over one term to a group of up to 12 students. Other duties and responsibilities include (but are not confined to) dissertation supervision and marking for a cohort of both BA and MA students; and acting as Personal Tutor to c.20 undergraduates.

#### Knowledge, Skills & Experience

- Expertise in relevant period of British history
- Knowledge of current teaching and learning practice in Higher Education
- Teaching and public presentation
- Proven record of ability to manage time and work to strict deadlines
- Excellent interpersonal, oral and written communication skills
- PhD in an appropriate field of history
- Experience in teaching in higher education
- Assessment of student work
- Commitment to high-quality teaching and fostering a positive learning environment for students

### Activity

Review your current CV using these example jobs or a similar research or teaching post in your field or academic discipline.

Do you have evidence for the specific skills and experiences asked for in your CV? If you do, you should update your CV.

If you have the type of evidence required, is it placed within your CV in a way which will make an immediate impact on the shortlisters? If not, how could you organise your CV to achieve this? potential options are:

- Add a Technical/Scientific/Laboratory/Programming Experience section on the first page of your CV immediately after or before the Education and Qualifications section

- Emphasise these skills as part of the Education and Qualifications using separate points immediately after the information about your PhD

If you have adopted one of these approaches have you presented the experiences you have in the correct order for the position applied for?

Ask a colleague to undertake the first page impact check on your CV against the job details. Can they quickly identify the main areas required from your document?

Undertaking a PhD is demanding, working in novel areas may not promote confidence in your ability and comparing yourself to senior academic colleagues may not help your confidence. However as you move on from your PhD into an academic research or teaching role your CV must show evidence your ability to work at the next level.

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### Building from postdoctoral research/teaching experience to a first independent academic position

Moving from working as a postdoctoral researcher or teaching fellow to an independent academic post is a key transition point in your career and the competition for these academic posts is intense. As stated at the beginning of this e-book, getting on to a shortlist of four or five is extremely challenging and your application documents, CV, cover letter/supporting statement and in some cases a research and teaching plan, will need to make a strong case both in terms of your past record and your future plans.

This section will therefore begin by looking at some of the key aspects of this career transition and their implications for the style and tone of the applications. This will be followed by suggestions on CV and cover letter/supporting statement layout and content.

### Transition from postdoctoral researcher or teaching fellow to independent academic

In 2012 the survey **“Getting the first lecturing job”** was conducted by careers advisers who work with researchers. The aim was to provide evidence and insights into the role of lecturers in UK universities and the resulting report was published in December 2014. One of the survey questions asked for the top three attributes respondents would look for in candidates for a lectureship in their discipline. The overall headings were research, teaching and personal qualities and for each of them respondents identified the evidence they would be looking for:

#### Research

- excellent research profile or record;
- good clear research plans for the future;
- a wide range from, collaborative working to communication skills, enthusiasm, drive and passion;
- strong publication record or evidence of potential to publish;
- evidence of success in attracting funding or potential to win funding;
- evidence of ability to conduct independent research.

#### Teaching

- evidence of teaching ability;
- experience of teaching;
- good subject knowledge;
- enthusiasm for teaching.

### Personal qualities

If these are the attributes being looked for, your application documents have to start to convey this clearly and quickly to the shortlister. Of course you also need to take account of the information included in the job advert and application information pack. There are some key differences between adverts for postdoctoral jobs and those for independent academic posts. Those for postdoctoral research can include specific techniques required and those for teaching may specify the exact curriculum areas to be delivered. Contrast this with the statements below from some recent adverts for academic positions. These statements do not state exactly what research or teaching the new appointee will undertake and therefore the onus is on applicants to set out the contributions they are going to make in the role as well as providing evidence of what they have achieved so far in their career:

#### Research

- Developing and consolidating existing research interests within the School of History and Cultures, both individually and with others, with a view to publish high quality research
- Initiating and participating in broader, cross-School initiatives, both multi-/inter-disciplinary and with historians working in other Schools of the College of Arts and Law, and/or with colleagues in the College of Social Sciences)
- Candidates should have an emerging track record of outstanding research with impact and the potential to attract external funding. They will initiate and participate in collaborative activity with School members, and across the University

#### Teaching

- Contributing to existing undergraduate courses (special subjects and more generally) and development of both new courses and programmes
- Taking a full part in the consolidation and development of postgraduate work, building on initiatives developed by our Centres (e.g., the MA in Contemporary History; MA in Renaissance, Reformation and Early Modern Studies; MA in Global History; MA in West Midlands History; MA Modern British Studies)
- Be able to teach at a range of different levels
- Be able to contribute to curriculum design and development





### **Presenting evidence and setting out future contributions – preparing an application for the next level job**

You will probably need to use a number of documents to effectively convey the evidence from your career to date and to set out your future contributions. This will be a combination of an academic CV, cover letter, supporting statement, research statement or teaching plans.

Application systems do vary in their requirements and can also involve online application systems. For the purposes of this ebook the CV and cover letter/ supporting statement formats will be the focus for reviewing your approach, however, much of the evidence you will collect for a “next stage” application can be adapted for on-line systems.

### **Curriculum Vitae – Does it support your application for an independent academic position?**

Your CV will usually be used to demonstrate your track record and evidence from your career to date. It could be described as a factual document BUT it still needs to look forward to the next level job. Take some time to reflect on your CV as it is currently presented and use the suggestions below to focus on those areas that shortlisters will also be focussing on:

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### **Presenting your research record and evidence**

Is your CV emphasising your current experience and activity as a postdoctoral researcher or is the presentation still that of a PhD researcher?

**Option 1** – should you now start your CV with your Academic Research Career in reverse chronological order so highlighting your current research at the top? Your PhD could be included in this section as the start of your experience.

If you prefer to keep an Education and Qualifications Section as the first section, does it really need your school qualifications and details and even your undergraduate degree? Could you focus the section on your postgraduate education and qualifications?

Is your CV highlighting a “good quality” or “solid” academic track record? Following the suggested layout below:

“*The important aspect would be to show a continued and, ideally, an increasing output .... I would hope to see some of the papers in top journals in the topic area, ideally those where the candidate is first author*”

Getting the first lecturing job AGCAS Report Dec 2014

**Option 2** – have you included research achievements, funding and awards? Such evidence could be highlighted in a specific section or incorporated within a research career section?

Check how easy it is for your reader to identify this evidence, ask a colleague to undertake this quick check for you. Remind them to do so as if they were working through a large number of applications. Give them a time limit of less than a minute.

If you have this track record, is it consolidated in one part of your CV or spread throughout? If the latter, does this make it more difficult for the shortlisters to assess your record immediately?

**Option 3** – would your publication and/or funding track record be more logically situated immediately after your research career experience? I am aware that publication lists etc can be placed at the end of the CV but does this still work? It can be helpful to group research activity, how it has been funded and outputs:

- Academic Research Career experience
- Awards and Grants – the availability of these will depend on your academic discipline
- Publications
- Other dissemination such as conference presentations/policy papers
- Public Engagement and Impact



### Presenting your teaching experience

Levels of teaching experience and activity do vary greatly between the academic disciplines and this will be reflected in the expectations that shortlisters will have. Remember that your application will be assessed by those from your discipline – they will know what level of experience you are likely to have had. If you have undertaken a teaching fellow role then you will, of course, have a specific period of employment to focus on in this section.

**Option 1** –Teaching experience – in this section what does your current CV offer? A list of classes taught with little or no information other than this? If so, could you include other details? For example:

Have you designed and delivered a specific input or contributed to modules?  
Are you a member of a teaching team? Have you experience of designing, marking and assessing assignments and/or examination questions?

Some of you will have had specific experience as a demonstrator or teaching assistant. But have you also undertaken project supervision for masters or undergraduate students?

**Option 2** –Do you have a teaching qualification? If so, would it be better to include it in the teaching section? If you hold membership of the Higher Education Academy, have you included this evidence?

Those at the early stage of a research career are not always expected to have teaching qualifications so do not be concerned if you cannot include this in your CV. If you do not have a qualification but have attended courses offered by your university, have you included these in your CV? They may demonstrate that you are beginning to develop your practice?

**Option 3** –Consider whether you have other evidence which could demonstrate some engagement with activities related to teaching – delivering a guest lecture, involvement in outreach projects especially with schools. A Public Engagement section might also be viewed as a positive indicator towards an ability to teach.

If there has been little opportunity for you to gain practical teaching experience remember that this will be a key part of any interview for a position that includes teaching duties. Your research presentation may be used for this and you could be asked to explain your research as if it were to an undergraduate audience.

### Presenting evidence of management/administrative experience contributions to academia

Is your CV emphasising your current experience and activity as a postdoctoral researcher or is the presentation still that of a PhD researcher?

**Option 1** – Identify activity undertaken outside your immediate working area such as committee representation, conference organisation, establishment of or contribution to academic networks locally, nationally or internationally.

If you have volunteered for a particular area of work make this clear in your CV.

**Option 2** – Have you been involved in peer review or editorial work? Check how easy it is for your reader to identify this evidence, ask a colleague to undertake this quick check for you, remind them to do so as if they were working through a large number of applications. Give them a time limit of less than a minute.

### Cover Letters/Supporting or Personal Statements

Application systems do differ and this section refers principally to applications where a cover letter or other supporting statement is required. Some systems do ask for specific documents such as a research plan and/or a teaching plan or philosophy. When you are asked for documents try to ensure that any cover letter or statement addresses only those areas not already covered, for example personal commitment to your academic career or other examples of contributions to the wider academic community.

For the classic letter or statement systems - they do not want to see supporting statements which repeat most of the information contained in the CV in a narrative formative. They will say “I can see all of this in the CV. I want to know what you are going to do and how you are going to contribute to my department/school/faculty/institute”.

Therefore your documents need to **actively** look forward into the role you will take on as a newly appointed academic/independent researcher and they need to do this from the first paragraph onwards. I regularly review and offer feedback on academic applications and when the main paragraph begins with statements such as “My current research has been centred on ....” or “My work with Professor xxx has involved ...” I am concerned that this will not achieve the impact needed. It may appear to your reader that you are sending out a generic letter which could apply to any similar job opportunity.

#### Activity

If you have used this general writing style previously, read Parker and Derrington's work on the assert-justify writing style. Although this is part of their approach to grant writing it translates well into application documents – “First you tell them; then you convince them”.





### Presenting evidence of management/administrative experience contributions to academia

Assert-justify style communicates more effectively with speed-readers, tired readers, and lazy readers.

These readers will skim through your document. The neurology of eye-movements dictates that, provided you put blank lines between the paragraphs, their eyes will skip from paragraph to paragraph. They will read the first line of each paragraph. Thus they will read the assertions and get the headline messages. If they are inclined to disagree with the headline messages, they will dig down into the arguments that justify them.

Assert-justify style makes it easier for diligent readers, such as referees, to examine your arguments in detail.

Each paragraph starts by stating what the argument is about. This makes it very easy for the reader to find the arguments they want to examine. They never face the problem of wading through an argument wondering where it is heading.

[Assert-justify style](#) makes it easier to write short paragraphs.

In argue-conclude writing you have to spend a lot of words preparing the ground for the argument. If you start by asserting the point you want to make, you leap straight into the argument without spending any words.

Although in response to a question on performance at interview the following quotes are pertinent to consider when you are preparing cover letters and supporting statements:

“*Make it hard for you to be rejected by providing evidence. Work out your fit and contribution to the department (not just whether it's good for you)*” – I would also add to this, consider, inter-disciplinary options for both research and teaching.

“*Show you have intelligent thoughts about how you could contribute to teaching in the institution over the next two or three years courses/lecture series you could teach*”

“*Show that you have thought beyond your current funding sources*”

“*Show you have a good publication future as well as a track record*”

(Getting the first lecturing job – ACGAS Research Staff Task Group Dec 2014)

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### Activity

If you are currently preparing an application, or have recently done so, review your letter or statement against the expectations above and the “assert-justify” approach:

Did you clearly and quickly set out with some detail the research you are going to conduct or the teaching you will deliver? Or did you include such statements as “I hope to continue my research interests in ..... in this post” or “I am prepared to take on whatever teaching is required.” Such general statements do not provide the detail that may be expected from applicants.

The detail looked for could include:

- Information on specific examples of the research you intend to conduct, how you will fund it, potential outputs and impacts and how it compliments or brings something new to the current research profile.
- Identifying potential collaborations within and outside the department/school or institute – giving “names” of potential partners or offering evidence that you have already started to develop contacts can also show that you are presenting yourself as ready for the new level of work expected of you.

For teaching, research the current curriculum and identify those aspects of it that you would be best placed to contribute to but also offer an example of contributions you could develop from your research. You may not have to go into huge detail on curriculum content but this will show that you are connecting your research to teaching.

Researchers can sometimes be concerned that including specifics as suggested above is a little too arrogant. I would emphasise that you are attempting to demonstrate that you are ready for this level of work and that all the experience and training undertaken as a PhD and postdoctoral researcher is going to be put into practice. Your past record, i.e your CV, is important but you cannot rely on those reviewing your application to make assumptions from this about what you are going to do in the future, they expect you to tell them.

### Final Tips

Applying for jobs is time consuming and demanding, so try to gather as much information as possible even when you are not actively job hunting. Identify actions you could take in advance of any application process, for example regularly recording career progress, reviewing your CV, developing evidence based research plans, researching funding sources and calls etc. Try to make your career development an incremental process.

When you are actively making applications, (dependent on the timescale given to you by the recruiter), allow time for drafting documents and getting feedback on them. Ask your academic colleagues or others such as staff developers or careers advisers for feedback.

Finally, be bold, state your case clearly and present yourself as ready and prepared for the next level in academia.

## Writer profile



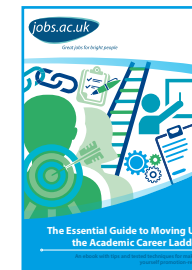
### Clare Jones

**Clare Jones is a Senior Careers Adviser at Nottingham University**

Clare has been working with research staff and students since 2005 offering individual careers guidance, advice and information and delivering career management training courses across the university. Clare would describe her own career as being a “classic skills portfolio career” and she is strongly committed to enabling researchers to recognise and value all their skills and experiences.

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## Additional reading



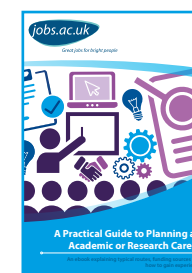
### The Essential Guide to Moving Up the Academic Career Ladder

This e-book has been developed to help all those who are considering undertaking a PhD but its focus is on using career decision making approaches to assess and prepare for this rather than on the choice of research topic.



### How to Write a Cover Letter for Academic Jobs

The market for jobs in both academia and other sectors is competitive, and you therefore need to plan ahead, be strategic in your job search and look at ways to stand out from the crowd. This ebook can help you.



### A Practical Guide to Planning an Academic or Research Career

This ebook will help you to decide whether doing a Masters and then a PhD followed by an academic career is for you. Also included are a couple of simple 5-minute activities to help you consider your options and an action plan template to help you plan your academic career.





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