

# The Essential Guide to Moving Up the Academic Career Ladder

An ebook with tips and tested techniques  
for making yourself promotion-ready

## 1 Introduction

In academic life, moving up the career ladder has its perks: more money, of course, but potentially also more time to pursue your research interests, and more power to influence the direction of your department and your field.

However, getting a promotion takes time, effort, and sometimes just a bit of luck or wiliness. While the process and criteria are slightly different at every British university—and different yet again in overseas institutions—this guide will provide you with a useful overview, tips, and tested techniques for making yourself promotion-ready.

### Who should read this ebook?

Anyone who has taken the first or second step on the academic career ladder, and wants to ensure that they take advantage of opportunities for promotion to the next level.

This ebook will cover:

- Promotion pathways: the general structure of UK academic post hierarchy
- Promotion procedures
- Key activities to make you promotion-ready
- Applying for promotion
- What to expect during the selection process
- Dealing with being passed over
- Success! Now what?



## 2 Promotion pathways

Almost all UK universities utilise the same basic hierarchy of academic posts:

Lecturer

Senior Lecturer

Reader

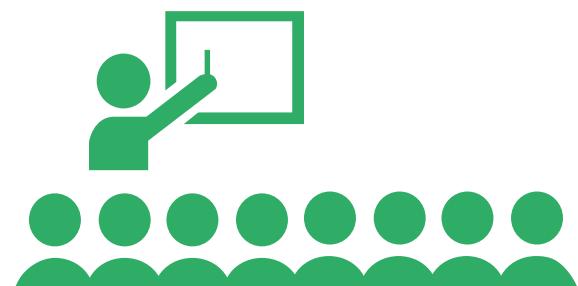
Professor

At some, a lower level has been created for Assistant or Associate Lecturers (who are often not on permanent contracts); at others additional levels exist, such as Principal Lecturer or Chair. Clinical academic posts and Research posts may be handled or paid slightly differently, but are within the same overall framework. Endowed or Named Chairs/Professorships, however, are special posts, usually backed by an endowment, and will have specific criteria and application procedures.

Also, quite a few universities now offer Teaching Fellow or Senior Teaching Fellow posts, which may be equivalent in pay to Lecturer or Senior Lecturer but, as their titles give away, require the academic to focus primarily on teaching.

Within this basic hierarchy there will be increments, which will usually correspond to the nationally negotiated single pay spine. However, some prestigious institutions go above and beyond this baseline agreement, and those in the capital add London weighting to their offer.

A few UK universities are not currently in compliance with the national agreement. If yours is one of these, your union representative will be an important ally in understanding and negotiating this situation.



## 2

## Promotion pathways



Working your way up through the increments within a single job category (e.g. Lecturer) is generally automatic as long as you are meeting the conditions of your employment – and most universities have special schemes that allow you to move up an extra increment or over a certain threshold as a reward for work that has gone far beyond what's expected. But once you get to the top increment within your category, increasing your pay beyond any union-won cost of living increases means gaining promotion.

### Alternative ways "up"

Better-paid administrative or "academic-related" roles can provide alternative opportunities for promotion, if they fit your career plans, and the traffic goes both ways. For example, it is not uncommon for researchers to seek promotion to an academic post, or for academics who discover an aptitude for administration through top departmental roles to enter the ranks of senior administration. You can find out more in this article [about lateral moves within academia](#).

### Teaching-only contracts

If pedagogy is your greatest passion, a progression route via teaching-only contracts now exists in some universities. There have been some significant changes in recent years on reward and recognition for teaching. For example, many universities have now changed their policies for career progression and have created promotion pathways for teaching-focused staff that enable promotion to Professor.

Many Senior Lecturer, Reader and Professorial appointments still require a strong research record, however, so a teaching-only route could hamper your outward mobility. Talk to your peers and mentors to see what is the norm in your discipline/institution.

## 3

## Promotion procedures

Every single university in the UK has its own procedures for academic promotions. Your institution's Human Resources department should be able to give you detailed information and any necessary forms; in some cases personal advice and direct support may be available—especially for academics who have returned after a career break, taken a new direction, or who may experience barriers due to disability, health problems or taking time out for parenting/caring duties.

For example, [Lancaster University](#) provides well-written examples of what a successful application for promotion should look like at different levels. The [University of Kent](#) has recognised barriers affecting female applicants by running special events for women seeking academic promotion, and offers very clear documents and timelines.

Your Head of Department or line manager should be your next port of call. You can make planning for promotion the focus of your upcoming annual review, for example. With both of you looking at your record, and their knowledge of candidates who have successfully pursued a higher post, it should be much more clear what steps are likely to bring you to your goal.

If your Head of Department or line manager are unhelpful, this may be a clue that the only way up is out...



### Important Tip:

Watch out for deadlines! The promotion process usually involves an immovable annual application date, and specific steps that must be taken in advance of this. Keep this in mind as you plan.

### 3 Promotion procedures

#### Key activities to make you promotion-ready

Only you can say what your weakest and strongest points are when compared to your peers, or to where the bar has been set by your institution. Development in the following areas will always help your chances—based on where you are now, prioritise accordingly.

#### 3a Finding an academic mentor

This may or may not be someone who has been assigned to you as a mentor when you were a new member of staff. A true mentor is someone who is senior, knowledgeable and willing to give you honest, trustworthy advice. Watch out for “mentors” who actually see up-and-comers as a threat, and silently sabotage their careers. Look for someone who shows collegial qualities in how they talk about and work with others.

Mentoring becomes a chore when it's all one way, of course. A good mentor will push you to contribute more to the department, and may ask you to help with projects they favour. That's all part of the game. In return for your support and hard work, you should receive backing for your efforts (if not, you may want to look for a more helpful mentor!)

##### Important Tip:

At some universities, the promotions process includes a requirement for references from senior colleagues. Your mentor is a natural choice for a referee. Always choose referees carefully, and be aware that some senior academics may see you as potential competition and act accordingly.

A highly placed mentor who knows you well, and to whom you have proved yourself, can be your most powerful ally. Whether their advocacy takes the form of dropped hints or direct recommendations, it can make all the difference.

##### Important Tip:

If your department or programme group is not dynamic about research, that can drag your career down. Fight back by joining a strong external national or international research group, like those in the [Social Sciences Research Network](#), to find inspiration and collaborators.

#### 3b Continuing professional development (CPD)

Use CPD opportunities to address anything that might be seized upon as a weak spot. If your university has a push for staff to achieve PGCE or FHEA status, don't hesitate to go for it. If research is your shortcoming, seek out short courses on useful methodologies, join a research group, and attend sessions on responding to tenders. You can keep track of your achievements using the [jobs.ac.uk Interactive CPD Toolkit](#).

Ensure that you don't have any skill-gaps that could annoy colleagues: for example, don't be the person who always submits late marks to the Board or dumps unwanted chores on admin staff because you haven't gotten to grips with technology. When your name comes up, you want to ensure that what everyone thinks of first is something positive.



Even conference attendance can be a promotional weapon. It will appear in your application as CPD, of course, but an enhanced public profile gained through speaking or networking can filter back to decision-makers in other ways too, such as remarks by internal or external colleagues.



### 3c Make yourself visible

This brings us around to one of the most important factors in promotion, visibility. Perhaps the greatest factor in dashed dreams is not already being well-known to the selection panel. Far too many academics toil away modestly, and are better known to students than to the higher echelons of their own department.

**What can you do?** Take the initiative—literally. If there's a call for people willing to do admin chores, take the one where you will be seen, and by the right people. That means choices like being Head of Research, or staff rep on the departmental council, not a behind-the-scenes role. And once you're in place, act proactively and very, very publicly.

Make sure your research and teaching excellence is seen. Put up displays, send out emails, hold public events to which you invite the top brass, and get written up in department and university newsletters, alumni magazines, and other places decision-makers are likely to see your name. Be sure to mention your work whenever appropriate during committee and departmental meetings.

Enlist colleagues to help, too (and agree to help them along when it's their turn, too.) Be someone whose behaviour towards others gets positive comments, not complaints.

Also, have a look at what your University profile and websites say about you. Make sure your publications, research interests, and contributions are accurately reflected (see also Social networking, below).

Your employer can only value work that it knows about, so get the word out about what you do:

**“ You do have to be willing to boast. Managers don't always know what you do, and success is not always fairly credited. ”**

Richard Berry, University of Sunderland

### 3d Teaching excellence

What students say about you is starting to matter more than it used to. **Ask yourself...** What could you do this year to improve your student feedback? How can you bring your fantastic student feedback to the attention of people who matter?

What else could you do to make your teaching more visible to colleagues? Possibilities here include ensuring that really great lessons are co-taught or observed by senior colleagues who are likely to be on the selection panel, or who could act as referees.

### 3e Research activity

Lack of research participation or a poor track record at gaining research funding are sure career-stoppers. If you're struggling in these areas, find out who in your department has the most success, and ask them directly for tips.

Better yet, attach yourself to a research star, co-authoring research tenders or funding applications, so that their success will also be yours. But don't expect to be passively pulled along on someone else's coattails. Unless you're willing to do more than your fair share of work, the result may be a negative report rather than an enhanced reputation...

### 3f Publishing



Publishing matters, and it's about both quantity and quality. Have a look at last year's crop of successfully promoted staff in your area. How many publications did they have over the preceding years, and how were these different from your own in terms of journal quality, visibility, or type? This exercise will tell you what kinds of publications give you the most traction.

Co-authoring, whether it's with colleagues or your own research students, is the quickest way to beef up your list. However, the secret of many prolific academic writers is that they get more publications out of a single piece of research. They may, for example, write an article on their research methodology for one journal, discuss theoretical issues in another, and submit preliminary results to a third, before even thinking about a final piece analysing outcomes. So look at past projects you may have considered "finished" and projects that are still in progress, and ponder ways you might be able to get extra publication mileage out of them. Even research that turned out to be a dead end can be valuable material for journal articles.

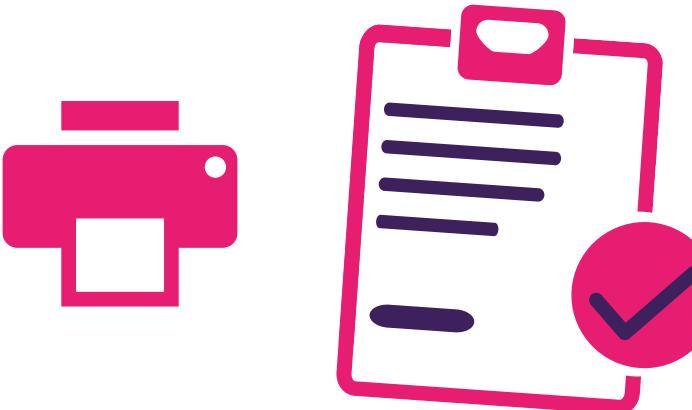
## 4

## Activity: My promotion plan

As what you've read already has no doubt driven home, academics who successfully pursue promotion are highly organised and follow a clear strategy. Use this worksheet to start pulling together the paperwork and supporting items you need, and to think through strategic moves that will help you achieve your goals. You may want to print it out or save it as the first item in a "promotion pursuit" folder that you can fill with the forms, evidence and notes you need.

## Promotion Application Checklist

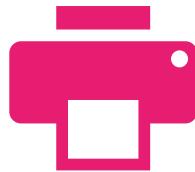
**Submission deadline:** \_\_\_\_\_



ITEM	URL or source	List of individual items needed	Completed?
University promotion regulations and guidance			
University promotion application forms			
Personal statement			
Supporting statement from Head of Department / other			
References / referees			
Research evidence (funding, publications)			
Teaching excellence evidence			
Administrative/other responsibilities evidence			

## 4

## Activity: My promotion plan



Notes:



## Promotion Planning Strategy

- **Discussion with Head of School/line manager**
- **Find and meet regularly with academic mentor**

Through these meetings and discussions with HR and other colleagues, identify and carry out actions that will improve your chances of achieving promotion, in the year before you intend to apply:

Continuing Professional Development actions needed:

University/external visibility actions needed:

Publications/research funding actions needed:

Teaching excellence actions needed:

Administrative/other actions needed:

## 5

## Applying for promotion

Make yourself a timetable that includes all elements of the process, and think about what you'll need to pull together. Make sure you have the latest version of any forms that are required (see Promotion application checklist), and that you've contacted relevant people.

If you need to be available for a meeting as part of the selection process, block out the time in advance to avoid double-booking.

If your University is running events for people seeking promotion, pencil these into your calendar as well. It can't hurt to be seen at these, and some are actually quite valuable in terms of tips and contacts.

Next, get your strategy going. The following section includes tips that may give your application a boost.

## 5a

### Strategic moves

**International exposure:** If you have few chances to shine in your current role (for example, if you've been stuck in a series of revolving Researcher posts, or with a massive undergraduate teaching load), consider what you can do to change the situation. An Erasmus transfer can be a quick and easy way to add the cachet of international experience to your CV, while a longer overseas or industry secondment could do even more.

But don't just disappear—send back regular updates on what you're learning and how it will be relevant when you return. Make sure these go straight to your Head of Department and key colleagues. And then follow through on your promises when you return.

**Interdisciplinary and other cooperative work:** Most universities look very favourably on academics who are good at making links with others. This can be in the form of setting up interdisciplinary courses or research projects, or other activities that link your area or department with partners within or without the university.

It can be as simple as inviting colleagues from outside your department who do work on related themes to join your research group or centre, or as major as undertaking research projects with outside partners from industry or other universities. In a networked culture, these links look good.

**Tactical role-playing:** Taking on a high-profile role in the year you plan to apply for promotion is another time-honoured tip. It shows willingness to work harder, and that's what they want to see.

**Nurture your referees:** Pay extra special attention to anyone who will be required to submit a report or reference on your behalf to the advisory panel or selection committee. Typically this is done by your Head of Department, but other references may be required as well. Some senior academics are hands-on and will write the report themselves, others will rely on the advice of one or two trusted colleagues who are more likely to know junior staff members well. Find out what the situation is where you are, and make sure relevant individuals have accurate and complete information about just how valuable you have been to the department.

**Mind the gaps:** If there's something missing in your career trajectory to date, think about why that is and how you can present this omission in its best light. Perhaps caring responsibilities (part-time working for a number of years, maternity or paternity leave) have put you at a disadvantage. Illness or disability may have limited certain kinds of activities. It could be that thanks to a large research grant, you've been required to devote more time to research than to teaching. It's better to give a positive explanation than to leave the committee guessing. Make sure you segue straight from this into talking about all the fantastic things that you have achieved, of course.

**Social networking:** Find out about and use any social networking tools that can enhance your profile. These can be internal or external systems. Start by making sure your official staff profile is accurate, complete, and doesn't feature an ancient or mug-shot-quality photo. But also take advantage of anything your employer provides that could raise your profile internally. For example, the [University of Bristol](#) requires staff to build a research profile using the Pure system, which is accessed by HR during the promotions process.

External tools such as [Academia.edu](#), [ResearchGate.net](#), and [LinkedIn](#) are also important—as is setting up a [Google+ profile](#) and linking this to your official University profile and other online sources of information. Why a Google+ profile? Because being Google's own creation, anything in it comes up higher in Google searches. And yes, members of the promotions committee may Google you at some point. More tips can be found in this article about [creating an academic profile online](#).

Finally, make sure you've set privacy settings carefully on social networking tools like Facebook, to avoid any drunken pratfalls from your student days becoming part of the discussion.

You must approach applying for promotion as if you were applying for an entirely new post—because in a way, you are.

**Every job has specific criteria. Read them very carefully and be able to show how you fulfil them all. Also, different levels of the same institution might be using different scorecards... your department might be really focused on certain things and thus support your promotion for application, but the central committee on staffing may be focusing on something else.**

Dr Stephen Shukaitis, University of Essex

## 5b Do's and don'ts

**DO** help important people with pet projects, if you think it will also help your cause. Yes, it's game-playing, but as long as you actually do the work, any credit or assistance you receive will be deserved.

**DO** just a bit of buttering-up if necessary: everyone likes to be liked and appreciated. Make sure your compliments are truthful, not examples of obvious puffery. Kind comments about colleagues involved in the promotions process to a third party who is likely to repeat them are probably your best bet.

**DO** use your annual review as a forum for putting everything in place, and draw attention to how you have met and exceeded the objectives set for you over time in your application.

**DO** drop gentle reminders as the deadline nears if your application depends on anyone else, i.e. if your Head of Department or line manager need to put you forward or submit an opinion.

**DON'T** barrack members of the selection committee annoyingly. There's a fine line between letting your light shine and shameless self-promotion. If you think you're about to cross it, ask a trusted friend first.

**DON'T** act like being promoted is an entitlement. It isn't, and this kind of attitude will quickly result in closed doors.

**DON'T** be the person who grumbles publicly about how others did not deserve to be promoted. Not having been privy to their application, you can't possibly know, and your words will say more about you than they do about anyone else. Indeed, allegations of favouritism can put you permanently on the outs with powerful individuals... especially if they are true!

## 6 What to expect during the selection process

Assuming that you and any others have submitted all required documents by the deadline, you can expect a waiting game while the decision is made. Many universities will tell you exactly when the advisory board or selection committee will meet and when you can expect a decision.

**In the meantime: look busy, because they actually are watching!**

Any decision will probably be communicated to your Head of Department shortly before you are told directly. A positive answer will often be given in both an email and in written form. You may be asked to sign a contract covering changes to your terms of employment.

## 7 Dealing with being passed over



Most first-time applicants for promotion are unsuccessful, and in the current economic climate it's certain many deserving academics will not be properly rewarded.

If you are passed over, ask for detailed feedback, and meet with your Head of Department or line manager to go over it. You may feel upset, but turn those feelings into energy to get ready for the next round instead of letting them fester.

If there's anything inaccurate, or if you become aware of circumstances that may violate equalities laws, that should be addressed directly with HR. It's best if your Head of Department, line manager or union rep (depending on the situation) does this, with your co-operation.

Your university will have an appeals procedure – but think twice before you go down this route. Make sure you have actually been passed over for wrongful reasons, not because someone else was more qualified, or you hadn't hit the mark in a key area.

Most of the time it will be clear from the feedback you receive which areas you need to develop in. So act to address these shortcomings directly, and prepare your next application for promotion in a way that highlights your responsiveness to feedback.

### Important Tip:

Many universities insist on a waiting period of two years between applications for promotion, unless you can demonstrate major developments over a single year. Check the rules before re-applying.

## 7 Dealing with being passed over

Repeated rejection despite surmounting hurdles is another matter. Sometimes it's clear that you are in a place where promotions are being blocked for almost everyone, or where office politics or other factors have set up an entrenched system that you can't overcome. That's when it's time to think about seeking promotion by seeking a post elsewhere that's at the next level.

If you don't want to move and you find yourself in a position where promotion is shut off to you within faculty, do everything you are asked to do without issue, but find like-minded people in upper management or the Vice Chancellors Office to discuss your ideas with. Get support from them, as they are more permanent than your line manager. Let them take credit for your ideas.

In universities agendas change as quickly as politics. Read the game, don't be perceived to be playing it. Manage the managers in a way that makes them feel good about themselves. Praise loudly and complain in quiet. And if your initiatives aren't opening doors to promotion, drop them. They're only ideas. Not all of them will work, so move on and only look back long enough to input the successful aspects into your CV.

*Anonymous (Professor), England*



## 8 "Promotion" through leaving

Just a few tips on this tactic: If you are a Lecturer seeking Senior Lecturer posts, a Senior Lecturer who wants to move up to Reader, or hoping to finally achieve Professor status and have tried and failed more than once with your current employer, research your options carefully.

Applying for a post elsewhere at the level you seek may be your best bet. Make sure that you tick all the boxes for the grade you desire before applying.

Analyse the initiatives or research you've developed and see how they align with the aims of another employer. Propose similar initiatives to the target employer and outline why you plus them is a great fit... In other words, promote the very thing that is undervalued by your current employer. The mission statement is also priceless when trying to align yourself with an institution, especially if they're failing to reach the mission statement.

Ultimately, you have to recognise in yourself what it is that makes you an asset to your employer. That's the very thing they won't want to lose, and others will want to gain.

*Anonymous (Professor), England*

Criteria can vary between universities, and those moving between them may find that when it comes to titles, it is possible to move down as well as up. This is not uncommon when moving between new universities, which are somewhat more likely to promote as they tend to use clearer criteria, and older universities, some of which make promotion quite hard to attain.

I had been promoted to Senior Lecturer three years previously, and applied for a Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader post at a 'redbrick' university. I got the post and was offered a better salary—but on the provision that I came in as a Lecturer. I accepted because the role was more aligned with my career plans, but soon found myself stuck at the top of their incremental scale. Beware!

*Anonymous (Senior Lecturer), England*



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## Success! Now what?

If you've gone through the process and come out of it with the prize of promotion, congratulations are in order. Take the time to reflect on your hard work and good fortune.

As you move through the next phase of your career, keep track of developments and achievements and document these. It will make your next application for promotion much easier. Also familiarise yourself with when your next opportunity to move up will present itself: next time, give yourself much more space for preparation.

And remember your colleagues as well. You are now in a position where you can mentor and advance the careers of promising junior academics. It's an important responsibility. Having benefited from the assistance of others, don't forget to return the favour.

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## Further resources

The Universities & Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) provides information about [national pay negotiations](#), including the latest framework agreement. The UCEA also provides quite a bit of information about [academic role profiles, pay and progression issues](#). These documents may be especially useful to staff who feel they may be facing equalities issues in promotion.



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## About the author



Dr Mitzi Waltz has recently embarked on working as a freelance disability consultant, trainer and writer, based in Amsterdam. She was previously Senior Lecturer in Autism Studies at The Autism Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, following five years with the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER), University of Birmingham, and a long career as a journalist and journalism educator. She has contributed to many key pieces of autism research and resources, including the DCSF Inclusion Development Programmes on working with children and young people with autism. She has written ten books, the most recent of which is *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (2013, Palgrave Macmillan).

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## Further reading

You may like these other ebooks from [jobs.ac.uk](#):

### [How to Write a Cover Letter for Academic Jobs](#)

An ebook with tips and examples to create the perfect cover letter.



### [Interactive CPD Toolkit](#)

A step-by-step guide to progress your career & record your continuing professional development (CPD).



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