

Postdocs at European universities. A brief guide.

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For graduate students of American universities who want to pursue an academic career, it might be natural to restrict the job search to postdoctoral positions in the US only. Less common is applying to postdocs elsewhere, so it is not always clear how to apply for positions in other countries, what is the timeline to do so, and under which aspects the process is different from the American counterpart. In this article, we will focus on the European job market which seems to be less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, in contrast to the American situation where it is clear that in the next years we will see a significant reduction in the number of available positions. In particular we will delineate what are the main differences in the application process, and give some guidelines which will help you navigate the job search, which can be very stressful especially in these uncertain times. We will also highlight some of the difficulties that you might encounter during the application process as well as some of the challenges and advantages that you might come across if you decide to move to a European institution for your postdoctoral position.

Before the application

The main thing to remember when one applies for a job in Academia, is that the process starts much earlier than one normally thinks. Especially when you apply to a position in a far away location, it is important to build a network which goes beyond the local

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circle of the researcher. It is needless to say that the main step is to first prove interesting theorems and then let the experts in the field about your new results. Do not hesitate to directly contact professors or postdocs who might be interested in them — maybe because you have answered one of their conjectures, or because you were inspired by their prior works — even if they do not know you. If you don't feel comfortable doing this, or you are not sure that the receiver will appreciate, you can always talk with your adviser or mentor to seek advice or to see if they can act as a mediator between you and the other person.

Now that many seminars and conferences are virtual, it is possible for you to participate in seminars which take place on the other side of the world and to significantly expand your network. Use these occasions, as well as in person conferences, schools or other research activities, to interact not only with your peers, but also with more senior mathematicians. Do not hide the fact that you will soon be on the job market: There is a chance that you are the person that they were looking for.

When and how to apply

If one had to choose two main differences between applications in Europe and in the US, they would certainly be where to find the advertised positions and when the applications are due.

Starting with the former, although some universities post their available positions on mathjobs.org as well, there are other platforms — for example euro-math-soc.eu/jobs or euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs just to mention two of them — where the positions at European institutions are advertised, but they are

often not an exhaustive source of information. If you plan to work with some specific professor or at a certain university, the best thing to do would be to get in touch directly with whom you want to work with and ask whether there are any open positions. Be sure to have all your application materials ready, because it might happen that if a position is indeed available you might be required to send the material for your application in a short period of time.

Another way to receive updates on job openings is to subscribe to mailing lists relative to your research field. Although these are often and mainly used to advertise conferences and PhD positions, they are also used to publicize academic positions of higher level of experience.

Keep also in mind that even when these positions are advertised on international or national platforms, most of the time each university has different rules for the submission of the application. This can range from sending all the documents by email to the hiring committee, to creating an account and upload all the material on a secondary website or sometimes directly contact the professor who is sponsoring the position and send them all the material after a preliminary chat. One consequence of this, which is not to be underestimated, is that the people who write your recommendation letters have to upload or send their letter following rules which are different than the ones they might be used to. Be sure to inform them about this well in advance.

We mentioned earlier that the second important difference between American and European postdocs is when to start the actual application. Unfortunately, in the same way as there is not a common platform for the positions, also the deadlines to apply for postdocs can vary a lot. Although some positions are advertised as early as nine months before the hiring date, many positions won't be posted online or made public more than 5 months before, and some of them might show up in the late Spring for positions from September of the same year. Of course, as for the American counterpart, it is always better to apply in advance and not wait for the last moment. This means that you should not wait to apply for positions or to ask a professor whether there are positions available at their university at the last minute.

The sooner you know of a position being open, and the earlier you apply, the more chances you will have that your application will be considered. If you are already in touch with professors at an institution you would like to work at, it might be a good idea to ask in advance whether there will be available positions in the next six months.

Postdocs at research centers

Similarly to the positions available at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, the Fields Institute in Toronto or at RIMS in Kyoto, there are also postdoctoral positions at European research institutes which are not necessarily affiliated to a university. Usually applications for these positions are more standardized, with annual or biannual deadlines, depending on the program you want to apply to. Some of these institutes, such as Max Planck Institutes (Germany), SISSA (Italy), IHES (France), Mittag-Leffler Institute (Sweden), offer postdoctoral positions which are comparable to post doc positions at universities. Research positions at other institutes, for example at MFO or at CIRM, are instead associated with pre-determined research topics and are meant to gather together experts and young researchers who work on a specific theme for a short period of time, from few weeks to up to a couple of months.

Challenges and advantages

We conclude with describing what might be the advantages and also some of the challenges that you could encounter moving from an American institution to a European one.

First of all, you might have to deal with more bureaucracy than you expect. You might be asked to produce many more documents for the application, or in order to sign the contract, than the ones required in the US. Although this sounds discouraging, this should not prevent you from applying to these positions. Just read carefully what they need when you start the application and, if you get the position and there is a lot of paperwork to do, remember that you won't be the first one dealing with the situation

and you can always ask other members of the new institution how to deal with this challenge.

Related to the bureaucracy, keep in mind that you might need a visa to work in Europe and, depending on your citizenship, this could take some non trivial effort. Depending on the type of visa you will be issued and whether your institution belongs to the Schengen-area or not, this might allow you to easily travel to other European countries without asking for other visas. If this is the case, then you will be able to travel freely within the Schengen-area — which encompasses most EU States, except for Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Ireland and Romania — in order to attend conferences or visit your collaborators at other universities. Europe is large and diverse, and it can be an excellent opportunity for you to meet and get to know different cultures.

Another aspect that might be scary is the language. Unless you are considering only positions in the UK or Ireland, you might end up living in a country where English is not the first spoken language. Depending on the country where the university is located and on the size of its international community, this might be a marginal problem or a very serious issue to consider. In any case, it is important to remember that most of postdoctoral positions in Europe do not involve mandatory teaching, and you are usually not required to learn the local language to do your job. It can however happen that in some universities some research seminars or advanced graduate classes you might be interested in attending are usually offered in the local language. But it can be an excellent opportunity to improve your French, or German, or Spanish or Italian, or

In conclusion: do not hesitate to broaden your horizons. Maybe the job you are looking for is on the other side of the Atlantic.