

CAREERS

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MOBILITY

Should I stay or should I go?

Five scientists share the upsides and costs of research opportunities at home and abroad.

Science is a mobile enterprise, but moving country doesn't work for all. Last year, a *Nature* article about a study that found citation advantages for mobility (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/gfkfbz>; 2018) generated a lively debate on the pros and cons of moving. Here, five scientists explain how they reached their decisions.

DALE NIMMO

Stay put to maintain momentum

Wildlife ecologist at Charles Sturt University in Albury, Australia.

Coming from a working-class background, I stumbled into Deakin University in

Melbourne, Australia, in the early 2000s, and stayed on for a PhD and two postdoc positions. I had never intended to become an academic researcher, but I enjoyed science. I stayed for the first postdoc because I had a great mentor, ecologist Andrew Bennett, from whom I could continue to learn. The postdoc gave me security, because I could avoid a period of unemployment at a time when my wife and I were planning to have children and wanted to stay near our extended family.

One benefit of staying in the same place is that I became a known quantity. As a result, colleagues at Deakin often asked me to contribute to their papers, from designing experiments to gathering statistics, and even the actual writing. For that reason, I had authorships on 10–15 papers beyond my main research that were published during that time. One drawback of moving frequently is

having to explain what you do, and what you are capable of, over and over again.

I was encouraged to move to another institution but I remember thinking, “It's not that simple. I'm not able to pack up my entire family unit and selfishly move to a new place every three years.” After I applied for a flagship fellowship but didn't get it, I did use some existing funding to go on a short trip to Germany to establish a collaboration with a researcher whom I admired — someone who had also stayed in one place and had successfully diversified his research through collaborations. The second time I applied, I received the flagship fellowship, which enabled me to establish my independence while remaining at Deakin.

I broadened my network of collaborators within and beyond the university, and started to publish with others more frequently. Competition for tenured positions in Australia ►

► is extremely intense. As soon as I finished my PhD, I felt as though I was in a race to get a permanent post in four to eight years. Any move would have slowed my progress.

I'm not necessarily a supporter of always staying put, but it's complicated. I now have a tenured position at Charles Sturt University in Albury, which is about 300 kilometres from Deakin. My wife and I were ready to move, especially for the security of tenure. I started my post in 2015 and received a three-year Discovery Early Career Researcher award from the Australian Research Council in 2017.

My top tip: consider the existing opportunities at your current institution. Look beyond the possibility of getting an extra 10% of citations to consider your well-being.

ARINJAY BANERJEE

Leave hierarchy

Virologist at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada.

I had never left India when I was selected in 2013, as one of two international scholars, to attend a summer school at the Interdisciplinary Center of Infection Biology and Immunity (ZIBI) at the Humboldt University of Berlin. While I was there, Vikram Misra, a virologist at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada, gave a talk on bat viruses. Afterwards, I asked to do a project with him. He agreed, and I won six months of funding to conduct research at his university on the spillover of bat viruses to other host species.

It was 60°C cooler than it had been in India when I landed in Saskatoon in early 2014. During those first few days, I found myself with a case of culture shock. I had no credit history in Canada and little money, but Misra helped me to get a mobile phone, buy groceries and pay rent. I was later invited to start a PhD at ZIBI. But I decided, instead, to accept an offer from Misra to stay at Saskatchewan to do a PhD with him, because choosing a PhD adviser is like entering a marriage: you have to choose the right fit. He is a fantastic guy who is doing important work. He has also pushed me to pursue leadership roles. You don't often see first-generation migrants taking on those positions.

Even though my career at Saskatchewan was thriving, the cost of living kept me from travelling home for five years. During that time, I got married and my parents celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary. I worry that I will have to live with the regret that I didn't spend enough time with my family.

But I couldn't have done this kind of research in India. And I'm not sure I would apply for a job back there for several reasons, including the hierarchy that still exists. In the West, we work as teams. Supervisors appreciate it when you point out flaws in their ideas. I'm on a first-name basis with the president of my university.

I'm not sure that I would be happy if I could no longer work in that way.

My top tip: an international move is a gamble. Place your bets on mentors who offer support and kindness, as well as expertise.

LIZ MARTIN-SILVERSTONE

Consider family ties

Palaeontologist at the University of Bristol, UK.

I had never wanted to leave my home country of Canada until my future husband (who was born in the United Kingdom) and I decided to go abroad to study for graduate degrees. We were both accepted by the University of Bristol, UK, where I embarked on a master's degree in palaeobiology. My mum had been diagnosed with cancer before we moved in September 2011. I left home with plans to come back at Christmas. But then my mum's health deteriorated and she died in January 2012. My advisers gave me the time and space I needed to grieve.

I subsequently started a PhD at the University of Southampton, UK, but my supervisor left and I had to find a new one back at the University of Bristol. These experiences have changed how I approach career decisions. As a postdoctoral researcher at Bristol, I'm now hesitant to make a move unless it's going to be long-term or I'm confident that it's going to be worth it. I consider the topic first, and then whether it is commutable or possible to work remotely with occasional visits.

So I've limited my search to the United Kingdom. I really like our life here — we're finally happy, with a good friendship base. I also just got British citizenship. I might consider leaving for a permanent job, but to move for another two-year position is not worth it, for me.

Ultimately, I'm happy that I moved, but I regret not being there for my mum's last three months. And my entire family is in Canada — I see most of them only once or twice a year. Yet I wouldn't be where I am today if I'd put off the move.

My top tip: moving country is a difficult decision. Don't make it lightly — it's not something that everybody should absolutely do.

MANUEL SPITSCHAN

Balance gains with losses

Visual neuroscientist at the University of Basel, Switzerland, and the University of Oxford, UK.

I've moved all over the world. It's enriching and I'm grateful for the opportunities, but it

has come with costs — financial, personal and family-related. Originally from Germany, I got my undergraduate degree in psychology at the University of St Andrews, UK. I spent four years at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia for my PhD. I then moved cross-country for a postdoc position at Stanford University in California, leaving behind a nice community of friends and colleagues that I trusted and liked.

It can be difficult to build that from scratch with each move. It takes time to learn how things work in each new department. There's a no man's land aspect to being a postdoc. No matter how hard you work, your whole career might not succeed. I'm giving up a lot, given that risk.

There's also the money issue. Moving expenses are rarely covered at the postdoctoral level. Unless you have savings, how are you going to fund your move? I have received some money, often in the form of advisers' discretionary funds, but you have to know to ask for it. It's also challenging to build a pension. If you've received a salary in three countries, contributing to a pension is not straightforward.

Among the tangible losses are relationships, from friends to romantic partners. It's disruptive to move every few years. I also missed out on the early years of my nieces and nephews, especially while I was in the United States. I wish that I had been there more during those times.

My current Wellcome Trust postdoctoral fellowship encourages recipients to develop new skills by working, for example, in different research locations, so I am now based in Basel, Switzerland. I worry that it can be dangerous to give the impression that moving is important at all costs. It is complicated. I see extremely talented people, who produce amazing work, not get grants because they are missing evidence of mobility on their CV.

My top tip: make sure that any move will be worth it. Ask yourself: 'What can I accomplish in the time frame of the job? What will I gain at the new institution, and what am I giving up?'

GABRIELA AUJE

Mobility can open doors at home

Plant biologist at the Leloir Institute in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I stayed at the same university in Argentina for my PhD and a two-year postdoctoral position. In 2011, when I ran out of funding, there weren't many job opportunities for me or my husband, who is also a scientist but who didn't want to stay in academia. We were both open to living abroad.

So, in 2012, I started a postdoc in the United States with Kathleen Donohue, a biologist at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Kathleen and I got along very well from the start, and I made strong connections with other international colleagues. My husband found a good job, our extended family visited a lot and we kept in touch using Skype and WhatsApp. It also turned out that two years old was the right age for my daughter to move to another country. She speaks English like she's a local and she loves to travel.

We returned to Argentina in 2017. Last year, I won lab space at the University of Buenos Aires to start my own group. My international experience made me more competitive when applying for the position. People who go abroad can find that it opens the door to opportunity in Argentina.

"I worry that it can be dangerous to give the impression that moving is important at all costs. It is complicated."

My time at Duke also led to my latest stay abroad — a five-month project at the Japan National Agriculture and Food Research Organization in Tsukuba, where I collaborated with a visiting scholar

whom I had worked with at Duke. I arrived in September last year, and my family came in December for my daughter's summer holiday.

Collaborating with people of disparate nationalities and with varying styles of work has informed what I want to gain from my own lab at home. I want to work with people from different backgrounds, who are doing strong lines of research and who collaborate with and complement each other. I don't want the kind of lab in which one person has only one project and doesn't interact with anyone else.

My top tip: people who have a family and are contemplating a move should make sure that everyone in their family will benefit. Once you're in the new place, find support groups. ■

INTERVIEWS BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

CORRECTION

The Careers feature 'The call of home' (*Nature* **566**, 143–145; 2019) erroneously stated that the study of scientists across Africa was conducted by the Global Young Academy. The survey was in fact co-led by Catherine Beaudry at Canada's Polytechnique Montréal.

TURNING POINT Community builder

Isobel Williams, a clinical neuroscientist at the University of Sheffield, UK, is a founding member of the Disabled and Ill Researchers' Network at the same institution. As a researcher with a long-term health condition, she has helped to build a support group and community for disabled PhD students, postdoctoral researchers and faculty members.

How does your condition affect your life?

I've had juvenile idiopathic arthritis, an autoimmune disease with no known cause, since I was four years old. After I received my undergraduate degree from the University of Sheffield, it got so bad that I had to take a year out to get both of my hips replaced. I am in pain every day and expect to need further surgeries because of the arthritis. Sometimes, I experience a flare-up — transient worsening of my symptoms — that can last for a day or even weeks.

Has your condition influenced your career?

After I earned a master's degree in cognitive neuroscience at Birkbeck, University of London, I gained clinical experience as a carer. I then returned to Sheffield to study medically unexplained neurological disorders, including psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, and how they relate to emotional and psychological factors. I'm keenly aware of the links between emotional and physical health, and bring a perspective to this research that others might not have. I'm working on a clinical trial that is looking at whether a nutritional intervention can prolong life in people with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (also known as motor neuron disease). I'd like to pursue work as a clinical psychologist alongside my research. I'm particularly interested in helping people who have functional and movement disorders.

Would you consider moving to another country?

I would love to work abroad. The main barrier to that is my health. I see a general practitioner regularly, take medications and consult a specialist twice a year — I rely heavily on the UK National Health Service to keep me going. If someone offered me a dream postdoc position in the United States, for example, I would consider it, but would have real concerns about health insurance — specifically, what my pre-existing conditions would mean for the type of health coverage that I could afford.

Have you experienced any discrimination?

Sheffield is a great place with a lovely work environment and existing support structures, but there is a general lack of awareness about disability that is not unique to the institution. For



CALYSTA BLEASBY

example, I have a disabled-parking permit, but people leave notes on my car that say I shouldn't be parking in a space for disabled people.

How did the Disabled and Ill Researchers' Network form?

I was ranting about these types of encounter at the pub with a colleague, Kay Guccione, who had already helped to set up networks for postgraduate parents and for researchers whose work is emotionally demanding. She helped to bring together PhD students who have disabilities. There are now around 50 of us, and we're still growing. We meet every three months and have a Google community and an e-mail list. We also share our experiences on social media using the hashtags #chronicallyacademic or #PhDisabled. The idea is to provide peer support, so that members know that there are others like them out there. Higher education has conventionally been able-bodied, but we now have more diversity, and that includes disabilities. We are working with the university administration at Sheffield to improve the process of applying for health-related leaves of absence for those with a chronic condition.

What is your advice for people who wish to create a similar network at their institution?

Create a website for the network, and invite people at your university who have a disability or illness to write a piece about their experiences of managing their PhD or postdoc. Because many conditions can be hidden, I also advise students, no matter where they are studying, to disclose their condition to their advisers and to set up boundaries and reasonable adjustments — for example, the need for regular breaks during the day or ruling out weekend work — that are necessary to protect their health. I'd also like people to feel comfortable with their disability. It's a sign of strength to have got this far in academia while facing extra obstacles.

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.