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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Where a golden state once gleamed, sterling opportunities shine

2 August 2012



Credit: Illustration by James Fryer

UK scholars once envied their US peers' lifestyle, recalls Paul Curran, but a drop in pay now has Americans biting at British offers

In the 1980s, like many other UK academics at the time, I headed west to the Golden State.

Working for Nasa in California, I was engaged in research collaborations with universities across the US. It did not take me long to realise that the salaries of my American academic colleagues were not just higher but significantly higher than I had received back home.

Academic lifestyles were more affluent than those in the UK, and that remained the case throughout the 1990s.

More recently, however, it has become clear that a slowdown in the growth of US academic salaries and a steady growth of those in the UK have started to redress that imbalance.

However, it was not until City University London embarked on a global recruitment campaign for academic staff that I realised just how far the pendulum had swung.

The first phase of our recruitment campaign is complete, the second phase is well under way and we will be launching our third phase in the autumn. With the help of an executive search firm, we are speaking to academics from around the world. In some cases these conversations can be relatively short; notably so for academics in Australasia, where growth in the Asian region has boosted both salaries and currency exchange rates. Major investment in higher education has had a similar effect on academic salaries in countries as diverse as Canada and India.

Salary comparisons were made by Philip Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, in a preface to a recent report entitled *Paying the Professoriate*.

The study had some limitations in relation to sample sizes, but nonetheless it offered an interesting view in which countries were ranked by average academic salary after normalising for purchasing power. The UK, the US, Australia and Canada all made the top 10.

The academic salary range also varied markedly between countries with, for example, the US range being much greater.

As City University London's current phase of recruitment started with 25 chairs, I was anticipating some short conversations with colleagues in the US. This has not been the case, and I found that the real-terms salary difference for professors and academic staff in general in the US and the UK has decreased by about 12 per cent over the past decade. UK academic salaries have seen a healthy 14.9 per cent real-terms increase from 2001 to 2011.

Of course, the short-term position is not as healthy; since 2008 the recession and subsequent funding changes have seen salary increases in the UK sector failing to keep pace with inflation.

However, it is comforting to know that academics continue to hold down third place in the UK league table of professional salaries.

The position in the US is not as stable: this is the sixth year in the past eight in which US academic salaries have failed to keep pace with inflation.

The recent real-terms salary downturn is most severe in the US "squeezed middle" between the big research universities and the small liberal arts colleges and in those states where economic recovery has faltered. One of these states is California.

Over the past decade (2001 to 2011) the real-terms salary increase across 17 major Californian institutions was 10.5 per cent; 4.4 percentage points less than that seen in the UK sector.

These figures vary considerably, from a 4.0 per cent real-terms decrease at California State University, Northridge to a 24.6 per cent real-terms increase at Claremont McKenna, a leading private liberal arts college.

As in the UK, much has changed since the economic downturn.

The 2009 decision by the California Faculty Association to accept two unpaid days a month for academics in the California State University system has resulted in a 3.2 per cent real-terms decrease in academic salaries for this year alone.

Universities outside that system have not been immune either, with the latest 0.8 per cent nominal academic salary increase at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) being equivalent to a 1.4 per cent real-terms decrease, according to the American Association of University Professors.

As if that were not enough, the proportion of tenured and tenure-track academic staff across the country continues to decrease: from almost half in 1975 to a third in 1995 then to a quarter by 2009.

As a result, many of our conversations with academics at Californian institutions have moved quickly past first base.

Despite economic difficulties and the inflation that has affected all professions, UK academic salaries continue to compare favourably to those outside the sector and, in some cases, outside the country. Salaries are no longer a barrier to entering the country in the way that they once were.

Postscript:

Paul Curran is vice-chancellor of City University London and chair of the Universities and Colleges Employers Association.