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Working Overseas in a School or University Library
by Joan Petit

For two years, my family and I lived in Cairo, Egypt, while I worked at the American University in Cairo as an Instruction and Reference Librarian. It was a fantastic experience, and I get questions almost weekly from students and librarians interested in the same kind of job, either in Egypt or elsewhere.

There are several other LIScareer.com articles about working overseas, such as Nancy Fawley's excellent resource list for potential job seekers. This article will discuss jobs in academic and school libraries, including tips on finding and attaining these positions. This article focuses on jobs for expats (or potential expats) rather than jobs where an American is hired instead of a local.

Academic Jobs

Based on conversations with expat librarians and the job postings I see, my impression is that most academic libraries looking to hire American librarians are in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia, especially Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Singapore. I've also seen listings for jobs in the Caribbean and South Pacific. Typically these universities hold US accreditation (and may even be branches of US universities), but make sure to investigate, because the American University of Pandora may be "American" in name only. It can be difficult for American librarians to find jobs in Europe because universities there often only hire people who already have European Union work permits. In contrast, hiring institutions in other parts of the world will often process your paperwork so you can live and work in their country.

You don't have to rule out non-US-accredited universities as potential employers, of course, but you should know the institution's status. You may also find universities accredited in Europe or Canada who want to hire Americans.

Institutions looking to hire Americans typically post jobs in the same places as American-based colleges and universities: in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the ALA JobList, LISjobs.com, and Inside Higher Ed. You should also check websites for specific universities. Resources for finding American universities overseas include the American International Consortium of Academic Libraries (AMICAL) and Education City in Doha, Qatar.

The application process is similar to the process in the United States: you write a letter and send it off with your resume. Typically a committee will review the applications and select some candidates for phone interviews. Don't count on being flown overseas for an on-campus interview, though. Some libraries may conduct interviews in the US at a partner/home institution or at an ALA conference. Or, as is typically the case with the American University in Cairo, the phone interview may be the only interview. I do know of one librarian who was flown, with his fiancée, to Singapore, for an academic librarian position, but this is uncommon. (I've often wondered if applications to positions overseas would drop if people knew they wouldn't get flown there for an interview!)

Academic jobs usually offer an expat package that includes benefits like health insurance and paid vacation and may include furnished housing, airfare from the US to the new country, a baggage or shipping allowance, several weeks of vacation and airfare back to the US each summer, and private schooling for your dependent children. Legal spouses (though usually not unmarried straight or gay partners) and children typically are included in housing and airfare benefits. Salaries vary, but shouldn't be too much lower than a comparable job in the United States. American expats in the host country are the best source of information on the cost of living.

If you are not offered an expat benefit package, you should research the institution carefully and make sure they're a legitimate organization who can support you overseas.

K-12 Jobs

The United States has embassies in almost every country in the world, and in almost all of those embassies, you'll find US State Department employees with kids who need to go to school. International corporations also send Americans and their families all over the world. So in just about capital city throughout the world, and in many large

non-capital cities, you'll find English-language American and international schools. The larger the expat population, the more schools there are. Typically, these are private schools with curriculums based on US, Canadian, or European standards.

While American kids usually go to American schools, and French and Francophone kids usually go to French schools, most will have an international flavor. For example, when I lived in Cairo, my son's classmates at K-12 Cairo American College included Americans, Egyptians, Turks, Israelis, and others-- some bilingual (or multilingual) with dual citizenship. First graders had typical American-style lessons, but also weekly specialized classes in Egyptian culture and Arabic language. The library was well-stocked and well-staffed. Indeed, high tuition (often paid for by parents' employers) supports excellent academic and recreational facilities, including very good libraries, at many international schools.

The best way for an American librarian to find a K-12 job overseas is to attend a job fair in the United States, where many of these schools do their hiring. Job fairs are scheduled in large American cities during the late winter and spring, with hiring for the next fall. Expect to have to register and pay to attend these job fairs, and perhaps be screened first by a hiring organization. Many teachers and librarians leave these job fairs employed for the next fall.

Not all international schools hire through job fairs, however. You can also search websites of different schools and apply directly. If you are interested in a particular country or part of the world, try to find schools there through Google, Wikipedia, or the US Department of State Office of Overseas Schools. When you apply directly, you may be interviewed by email, phone, or in person, though, again, it's unlikely you'll be flown to the campus.

As with colleges and universities overseas, check the school's accreditation. The English School of Atlantis may offer instruction in English but be accredited locally only and employ mostly local staff—and may not really be in a position to support an expatriate.

In general, you should expect these schools to offer an expat package with housing (or a housing allowance), airfare and shipment of personal items to and from the host country, a generous summer leave with airfare back to the United States, tuition for your school-aged children at the school, and health insurance and retirement benefits comparable to American jobs.

Notes on the Job Search Process

The overseas job search will be different from looking for a job in the United States. The hiring institution, for example, may ask if you are married and have kids, because spouses often go on the job market together overseas (and if your partner is a teacher, this can be a real advantage when looking for a job overseas).

Both K-12 and higher ed schools are likely to hire on an academic year calendar. Contracts may be as short as a year or two in length (two to three years seems typical). Overseas jobs seem to have higher turnover. Indeed, at K-12 schools, some teachers and librarians, especially those without kids, move schools and countries every few years.

Again, make sure you research the school thoroughly. Institutions hiring American librarians typically require ALA-accredited MLS degrees because of an accreditation requirement in the United States. Countries that train their own librarians typically don't need the services of Americans except in unusual circumstances. You may be able to find work in those countries, but they may not offer expat packages.

I turned down job possibilities in the Caribbean and Mozambique because neither institution offered a package that would support my family and me, nor was there any guarantee my husband would be able to find work. The Mozambique position at least provided housing for all of us, and schooling for my kids, but the administrator was quite direct in noting that the position paid enough to support a single person or dual-hire couple, but not a family of four. The position in the Caribbean sounded dreamy until I realized I'd have to pay for housing and schooling for my kids, and it was unlikely my husband could get a work permit.

You don't necessarily have to speak the language of the host institution's country. The most important requirement is

a sense of adventure. I had never set foot in Egypt when I accepted the job offer that brought my family (including two young children) to Cairo. But I never regretted my decision, either.

Ultimately, when people ask me if they should apply for a job overseas, I encourage them. Even the people I knew who didn't love Egypt were glad to have had the experience. And I've never met an expat who wished they had traveled less or stayed home more.

Useful Sources

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US State Department Office of Overseas Schools http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/

UNI Overseas Placement Service for Educators http://www.uni.edu/placement/overseas/

International Schools Services http://www.iss.edu/index.asp

The International Educator http://www.tieonline.com/default.cfm

American International Consortium of Academic Libraries (AMICAL) http://www.amicalnet.org/

Education City in Doha, Qatar http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_City

About the Author

Joan Petit serves as Humanities and Social Sciences Librarian at Portland State University in Oregon. She is delighted to be back in the United States after an adventurous two years in Cairo, Egypt. Joan holds an MSLS and undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as well as an MA in English from Western Carolina University.

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