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When Academia meets Real Life

For many academics, career decisions are often presented as rational exercises in optimization: choosing the institution with the strongest reputation, the most suitable research environment, or the clearest path toward promotion. In reality, however, these decisions are rarely confined to academic considerations alone. They unfold at the intersection of professional ambition, financial security, family life, geography, immigration, and personal identity. The further one progresses through academia, the more difficult it becomes to separate the trajectory of a career from the broader architecture of life itself. At some stage, the question ceases to be simply “What is the best academic opportunity?” and becomes “What kind of life can this career realistically sustain?”

One way to understand this kind of career crossroads is as a conflict between professional permanence and personal continuity. In academia, these two goals do not always align. A fixed-term research position at a prestigious institution may offer intellectual freedom, strong collaborations, and the opportunity to build an internationally visible research profile. At the same time, a permanent lectureship may provide long-term stability, institutional belonging, and the security required to plan a family life with confidence. For many early- and mid-career academics, the challenge is not simply choosing between “better” or “worse” jobs, but deciding which form of uncertainty they are more willing to live with.

Recently, I was offered a position as Lecturer in Digital Engineering and Transformation at Loughborough University. While I was genuinely honoured by the opportunity, I currently hold a fulfilling role at Trinity College Dublin and am beginning a renewed four-year contract as a Research Fellow, serving as co-Principal Investigator on my own project. Intellectually and professionally, the role at Trinity remains deeply rewarding. However, the realities of academic employment are difficult to ignore. Fixed-term contracts inevitably constrain long-term planning, particularly when applying for grants or building research programmes that extend beyond the duration of the appointment. Although I would very much like to remain at Trinity, I do not realistically expect a suitable permanent opportunity to emerge there within the next several years.

At the same time, accepting a permanent lectureship abroad introduces a different kind of cost — one that is often under-discussed in academic culture. My family and I have already experienced multiple international transitions, moving from the United States to the UK and later to Ireland, where we have now established a home and community. We recently bought our first house and welcomed a newborn child. In that context, another relocation is not merely a professional decision; it is a family decision involving stability, caregiving, finances, identity, and quality of life. Academic mobility is frequently celebrated as a marker of ambition and success, yet the emotional and logistical burden of repeated relocation can become increasingly significant as personal responsibilities grow.

The dilemma, therefore, is not simply about prestige or salary. It is about how academics evaluate risk across multiple dimensions of life simultaneously. A permanent lectureship may strengthen one's long-term institutional position and provide greater career security, yet it can also require sacrifices in personal stability, geographical continuity, and family cohesion. Remaining in a fixed-term research role may preserve intellectual momentum and personal rootedness, but it also prolongs uncertainty about the future. In practice, many academics are forced to choose not between ideal options, but between different forms of compromise.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this process is that there is rarely a clearly "correct" answer. Academic careers are shaped not only by publications, grants, and institutional prestige, but also by timing, relationships, family circumstances, immigration realities, and the simple desire to build a stable life. In that sense, these decisions are less about optimizing a CV and more about defining what kind of academic — and what kind of person — one ultimately wishes to become.

After considerable reflection, I ultimately decided to accept the position at Loughborough University. It was not an easy conclusion to reach, particularly because my time at Trinity College Dublin has been both intellectually stimulating and professionally meaningful. Nevertheless, I came to recognize that the opportunity at Loughborough represents an important long-term step in building a sustainable academic career. In an increasingly constrained academic landscape, where permanent positions are exceptionally competitive and long-term security remains elusive for many researchers, the transition into a lectureship carries significance beyond title alone. It provides a foundation upon which future research, teaching, leadership, and institutional contributions can be built with greater continuity and independence.

Ultimately, I came to see the decision not as a departure from research ambition, but as a strategic attempt to reconcile ambition with stability. Academic careers cannot be sustained indefinitely on uncertainty alone. At some point, questions of permanence, progression, and family stability become inseparable from questions of scholarly success. Accepting the lectureship therefore became, for me, not merely a professional move, but an acknowledgment that long-term academic flourishing depends not only on intellectual opportunity, but also on the ability to construct a stable and sustainable life around it.