

## **Combining work in Academia with International Development Consulting**

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**Increasingly**, academics are choosing to combine university careers with consultancy and the field of international development is no exception. The United Nations, development banks, bilateral aid agencies and international non-governmental organizations-like private sector industry-spend millions every year on outside consulting. So, it makes sense for academics in related fields to pursue these opportunities, especially in niches where they have an advantage.

### **CONTEXT**

Competition is fierce, however. James Fay's *Guide to Careers in World Affairs* estimates that USAID maintains records for 1,000 international consulting suppliers and the World Bank registers over 4,000 providers. These range from for-profits like McKinsey & Company to non-profits, individuals and hybrids. And they cover a broad array of classifications that include economics, financial and aid management, infrastructure, governance, human rights, healthcare, education, gender equality, disaster preparedness, and environmental and energy policy.

While consultants come from across the globe, the bulk of spending is still concentrated in industrialized countries. One UN report calculates one-third of consultants and nearly 40 percent of consultancy spending goes to providers from five countries: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Chile. Those who are situated in or near global hub cities are also favored.

### **QUALIFICATIONS**

Master's and PhD degrees are basic requirements, which helps the academic to an extent. Specialization is often prized as well. Thus, accumulated publications and presentations on specific topics, along with association, conference and network affiliation, tend to boost visibility and increase potential for attracting consultancies. The more lucrative (and competitive) areas are generally those related most directly to money: trade, competitiveness, economic integration, justice, fiscal and monetary policy, privatization, infrastructure, public health and technology. These are also the areas most pursued by the large private firms.

Academics often have a better chance of vying for consultancies in less high profile and profitable areas such as gender, education and indigenous or anthropological studies, for example, or for highly specialized or esoteric applications. Of course, it is easier to operate from an institution like Harvard, Stanford, MIT or Columbia that has ivy-league status and an established development trajectory. But this is less true for more specialized work where it is easier for specific departments within lesser known universities and individual professors to distinguish themselves.

Fluency in another language (especially Spanish, French or Arabic) is not absolutely necessary but extremely helpful, particularly for UN work and in Latin America, Africa and the Arab regions. Prior experience is critical, too. Those who have held international jobs— especially if they have lived abroad— have an edge. And those with UN or international organization experience have a bigger edge. Coming from a position on "the inside" provides an important leg up with regard to personal connections, knowledge of internal workings and politics, and manipulation of jargon.

## **PROS AND CONS**

The advantages of combining academia and international consultancy are numerous. Many of these are obvious: application of knowledge to different countries and cultures; possibility for travel and adventure; an emphasis on practical application instead of theory; and the status of association with world bodies like the UN, the World Bank or the IMF. Other "pros" are less apparent: exposure to a highly educated, non-academic group of professionals with a different perspective (and hierarchy); pressure to keep current in the field but in new ways and areas; and the possibility for reinvention and segueing into a new career path.

The difficulties of combining the two are also numerous. Consulting frequently requires travel flexibility, which may not coincide with a class schedule. Consulting is temporal, hit-and-miss, and connected to unique trends and fads. Access to information on jobs is notoriously faulty. Competition is stiff, the application process is cumbersome, and recruitment is seldom transparent. Development priorities, work styles, terminology and timeframes are very different from those in academia. Additionally, well-produced work may suffer from the "shelf syndrome"— where painstaking research and reporting does little more than sit on a bookcase or in a digital file, contributing little to development goals and outcomes. Plus, often the academic is legally prohibited from using the data produced for academic publishing elsewhere.

Still, while the reality of trying to combine academics and consulting can be frustrating, the international development arena provides incredible potential for rich research. The challenge for professors is to understand and perform in the role of consultant extending beyond the bounds of academic traditions and norms. Done well, this effort has the ability to bridge some of the gap between the ivory tower and the "real" world. Many times, academics look down upon those in commercial or development sectors as intellectually inferior, while development professionals often look upon academics as unproductive and incompetent nerds. If we can work toward instilling some of the rigor, objectivity and ethics of academia into the more practical, decisive, dynamic world of international development, both will be better off.