

# NURSE EDUCATION TODAY

## Acknowledging Attributes That Enable The Career Academic Nurse To Thrive In The Tertiary Education Sector: A Qualitative Systematic Review

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To optimise the career development in early career academic nurses by providing an overview of the attributes necessary for success.

**Background:** Evidence of early prospective career planning is necessary to optimise success in the tertiary sector. This is particularly important for nurse academics given the profession's later entry into academia, the ageing nursing workforce and the continuing global shortage of nurses.

**Design:** A qualitative systematic review

**Methods:** Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, Medline, ERIC, Professional Development Collection and Google Scholar databases were searched; resulting in the inclusion of nine qualitative nurse-only focussed studies published between 2004 and 2014. The studies were critically appraised and the data thematically analysed.

**Results:** Three abilities were identified as important to the early career academic nurse: a willingness to adapt to change, an intention to pursue support and embodying resilience.

These abilities give rise to attributes that are recommended as key to successful academic career development for those employed on a continuing academic basis.

*Conclusions:* The capacity to rely on one's own capabilities is becoming seen as increasingly important. It is proposed that recognition of these attributes, their skilful application and monitoring outlined in the review are recommended for a successful career in academia.

Keywords: abilities, academic, attributes, career planning, nurse, portfolio, resilience

### **What is already known about this topic?**

- The global nursing shortage impacts on faculty recruitment, retention and growth of quality academic staff.
- Nurses entering the academy find the work different from expectations and those of the clinical world.
- Support mechanisms for successful career planning, although gathering momentum in universities, remain 'hit and miss' for the individual.

### **What does this paper add?**

- This paper identifies attributes necessary for success as an early career academic nurse.
- The results provide vital information for planners of orientation and induction programs in faculties where nurse academics are employed.
- For nurses already employed these attributes can provide a framework toward achieving career goals.

## Introduction

Globally, a combination of tertiary education sector restructuring and rapidly changing working conditions are profoundly impacting on the relationship between academics and their workplace. Academics are increasingly required to be more adaptable and to take charge of their career progression (Musselin 2013, p. 49). As in traditional organisational careers, university careers have been conceptualised as having a linear trajectory, where individuals committed to a single university and advance hierarchically within it over the course of their career. This tertiary educational career trajectory is disappearing. Universities now require a more nimble workforce with the capacity to meet emerging changes (Skiba 2015). The shift toward protean thinking, or self-directed career planning is vital to their work-role repertoire and professional development (Petersen 2011). No longer can academics allow their careers to unfold; rather they need to take charge and proactively plan their advancement.

Career planning is an iterative individualised process, integral to achieving a fulfilling career (Andre & Heartfield 2011). Such planning involves assessing one's strengths and articulating a personal career vision and realistic plan for the future (Collin 2011). This plan needs to acknowledge and accommodate the impact that experience, personal lives and priorities have on career progression (Savickas et al. 2009). Roe (1956) claimed that work is part of a person's identity, as individuals work not solely for financial purposes, but also for personal achievement. In other words, the personal career plan is shaped by an individual's characteristics, experience, tasks, knowledge, training, skills, goals and philosophy (Hoekstra 2011). A career plan therefore, is an individual pursuit (McIlveen et al. 2011) and consequently better managed by employees than employers (Hoekstra 2011).

This paradigm shift comes at a time when nursing is vulnerable, due to limited growth in the next generation of academics (Bexley, Arkoudis & James 2013). This vulnerability is a result of the later entry of nursing into academia, the ageing of nursing workforce and the global shortage of nurses, particularly faculty (Nardi & Gyurko 2013). Over the past decade early career academic nurses have been recognised as being particularly vulnerable and in need of additional support as they transition to becoming an academic (Halcomb et al. 2014; Jackson et al. 2015). There is little research as to how the tertiary education sector can support this transition or the attributes that these nurses will require to succeed. While providing objective criteria for advancement in an academic career is vital, there is an urgent need for the nursing discipline to assist nurses to develop an academic identity and not just survive; but thrive in an academic role. This review will make recommendations for attributes that can be supported by faculty and used by early career academic nurses to lay a strong foundation for a customised, successful career.

## Methods

### Design

#### Aim

Published qualitative studies exploring the experiences and challenges of early career nurse academics were systematically selected, critically appraised and then thematically analysed to gain a collective understanding of the attributes necessary for successful career building.

#### Search strategy

The search strategy and outcomes are outlined in Fig. 1. Following consultation with a health librarian, the following databases were searched: EBSCO Academic Search Complete, Scopus, ProQuest, CINAHL, and the search engine Google Scholar. Search terms used were *nurs\* academ\* OR nurs\* work\* OR education, facult\*AND career OR transition*. The search did not yield any quantitative studies; therefore the approach chosen for the paper was a qualitative systematic review. This approach looks for 'themes' or 'constructs' that lie in or across the individual studies and a narrative synthesis can be used to explain the evidence. A study was eligible for inclusion in the review if it was published in English in a peer-reviewed journal between 2004 and 2014. The study participants had to be nurses employed by a university and were within five (5) years of commencing an academic role. All qualitative designs were accepted into the review. Reference lists were also scanned for relevant articles.

#### Critical appraisal tool

The content and the quality of the published works were appraised using Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al. 2014). The standards offer qualitative researchers and reviewers, guidance to improve the reporting of the synthesis of qualitative health research. The 21 items are arranged into 5 domains (Table 1a and 1b). The sections are designed to focus on credibility, neutrality and relevance: a process that lends transparency about the position, motivations and perspectives of the researchers (Krefting 1991).

#### Data analysis and synthesis

Qualitative analysis was carried out using a 'flow model'. This model has three 'types of analysis activity' (Miles & Huberman 1984, p. 24): the first focusses on a search strategy that allows for a steady systematic data selection, followed by data reduction where themes emerge and lastly new insights displayed (Miles & Huberman 1984, p. 23). It is an inductive process using the investigator's prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study to impart new knowledge (Ryan & Bernard 2003).

An interpretive approach was used when analysing the data. This allowed for direct quotes and relevant data to be extracted from the findings, discussion and conclusion sections of the papers which are then analysed using an independent thematic interpretive process (Sandelowski & Barroso 2007). The extracted data was coded, categorised and then reduced into overarching themes (Thorne et al. 2004) to ensure that data remained linked to the context. The findings were extracted using different colours for each study so that continual reference was made to the original article to synthesise ideas and provide new insights (Finfgeld-Connett 2010).

## **Results**

### Study appraisal

Nine studies (n=9) met the inclusion criteria. The studies reported on the experiences of nurses transitioning into academia and the resulting challenges. Critical appraisal of the nine studies is summarised in Tables 1a and 1b. A range of qualitative methods were used. All studies recruited by invitation, using convenience or purposive sampling. Five of the nine studies recruited from one university and the remaining four from several universities. Sample sizes ranged from 5 to 21. Time in academia ranged from 3 months to 5 years. Four were initiated in the UK (Boyd & Lawley 2009; Duffy 2013; Findlow 2011; McArthur-Rouse 2008) three studies in the US (Anderson 2009; McDonald 2010; Schriener 2007); one in Ireland (Dempsey 2007) and one in Australia (McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013) .

The quality of some of the studies was difficult to judge, due to lack of procedural or analytical detail provided. For example, the specific qualitative approach of some studies was not always made explicit and a lack of information in the earlier articles made it difficult to judge credibility of recruitment or interview processes. In one paper Boyd & Lawley (2009) knew the participants, but gave little reassurance of the anonymity of the participants. As well as increasing the likelihood of bias when interpreting the data, a knowing relationship with the researcher may have implications for the openness and honesty of participants during interviews. If there is a potential bias, researchers need to describe how this is managed (Patton 2005). General information about interviews was provided in only three of the studies (Boyd & Lawley 2009; Findlow 2011; McArthur-Rouse 2008) and only one study had the analysis viewed by several researchers (Boyd & Lawley 2009).

### Findings

The nurses' collective experiences were examined to determine the abilities that require attention by novice academic nurses. From the interpretative analysis and synthesis of extracted data, three abilities emerged that are important to enabling success: a willingness to adapt to change, an intention to pursue support and embodying resilience. This review

focuses on the necessity of these being adopted early in the nurse-academic transition period. It offers some strategies to enable the nurse academics to thrive in an ever-changing competitive tertiary environment.

### Adapting to change

Early career academic nurses did not seem to appreciate the profound difference between clinical and university work and that a different approach was required in order to engage with their new career (McArthur-Rouse 2008). Having a full time academic position necessitates, as one early career academic nurse reflected, *'a change in knowledge, skills, behaviours and values to prepare for the assimilated roles, settings and goals'* (Dempsey 2007). The extent of new skills required and the time taken to adapt came as an unexpected surprise to most. Being already registered nurses, they believed that the transition would be smoother (Schriner 2007) and quickly achieved (McArthur-Rouse 2008; McDonald 2010; Murray, Stanley & Wright 2014). Some did find that they did not come in as a *'blank sheet'* (Duffy 2013, p. 622) and given time, could adapt to the situation. Whilst others being unwilling to make the necessary cognitive, psychological and sociological adjustments made the decision to leave altogether and go ... *'back to nursing because 'I don't care how hard I work at that bedside for that 12 hours when I go home it's over'* (McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013, p. 50).

Anderson has called the early working period, one of *'learning and unlearning'* (2009, p.205) where the ECAN (early career academic nurse) has to learn to adapt - using new skills. With previous nursing positions the individual might reasonably expect to build on existing skills when moving around in nursing environments; but academic life is less hierarchical and more open to a less structured environment than individuals would be used to. Anderson (2009) uses the metaphor of *'swimming'* to relate to the ECAN *'finding their feet'* before they are able to expertly move *'through the waters'* (p.204). Another study describes the change process as *'like playing a game and not knowing any of the rules'* (Gourlay 2011, p. 594). Such rules would incorporate the individual's responsibility to engage with, not only new knowledge, but the language, relationships and procedures that that are required in order to adapt and be successful in career building (Findlow 2011; McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013). One academic noted *'my colleagues in higher education are able to empathise with me, but the solving of the problem has been down to me'...* (McArthur-Rouse 2008, p. 404). According to Duffy (2013), it is a pedagogical journey where new challenges are presented and a new set of skills are required for the necessary teaching, administration and research (Dempsey 2007).

During this period of new learning some early career academic nurses show a reluctance to let go of a prior identity so that they can move forward. Schriner (2007) describes this as being *'caught between values'* (p.149) and this group either takes more time to assimilate or just leaves the job. Those that stay come to a realisation that changes or a willingness to change has to occur. Such changes involved the need for further qualifications (McDermid,

Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013) or as Boyd & Lawley (2009) state, the nurses need to *'be able cross boundaries'* (p. 298) requiring conscious effort on the part of the individual to develop skills that can move them quickly forward in their careers.

#### Pursuing support

In the studies, feelings about transitioning into the academic role ranged from *'uncertainty'* (Findlow 2011, p. 119) to *'anxiety'* (Anderson 2009, p. 51) or, feeling *'daunted'* (Dempsey 2007, p. 4). Despite the range of feelings, role development was also stressful due to the greater challenges of a generally heavy workload and, what the new academic saw as a lack of faculty support (Dempsey 2007). Without effective support to meet their expectations, enthusiasm often waned over time and the academics became frustrated (McArthur-Rouse 2008) and their *'confidence ... was rapidly worn down'* (McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013, p. 50) as they strove to cope on their own (Duffy 2013), in *'a very different environment' with an academic collective creating its own tribal narrative that you are not a part of'* (Findlow 2011, p. 124). For some nurse academics the pressure of feeling overwhelmed as a result of their experience (McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013) and undervalued for their skills (Schriner 2007) the uncertainty became too great and they left to pursue a career elsewhere (Findlow 2011).

The newcomers' feelings of uncertainty and a lack of self-confidence were seen to be barriers to transition (Boyd & Lawley 2009; Dempsey 2007; Findlow 2011; McArthur-Rouse 2008). They also affected the taking up of an academic identity and as a follow on, opportunities for advancement (Murray, Stanley & Wright 2014, p. 393). Self-confidence is a reflexive process, thought to be at the core of constructing an Identity (Giddens 1991) and the participants in the studies found it a necessary asset for successful transition and *'moving on'* (Findlow 2011, p. 128). In one of the studies a nurse academic recognises the importance of confidence to career progression and work and described it as follows, *'I suppose a hindrance to my career and work is my own fear, my own lack of self-confidence'* (Dempsey 2007, p. 4). Another stated about her work ... *'this is what you want to do hoping that you will be able to do it ...'* (McArthur-Rouse 2008, p. 405). The last quote gives an indication of the uncertainty experienced by some newcomers to fulfil their role.

Many of the nurse academics felt that their lack of confidence and uncertainty about working as an academic could be overcome if they had more faculty assistance and feedback. (McDonald 2010). The most valuable and immediate resource for gaining insight proved to be informal mentors (Anderson 2009; McArthur-Rouse 2008; McDonald 2010). Informal mentors were usually self-chosen and could work with them on an individual regular basis when and where the situation merited. One nurse recognised the need to seek out her own faculty match, despite being assigned a formal mentor and this assisted with timely collegial feedback and adjustment.

*I was assigned a nurse faculty mentor who was teaching in my area but she was*

*not available at the same time I was. This was not a good match for a novice academic who frequently had questions. I sought out a more suitable academic who though we taught in different areas she was in the office daily and was willing to answer questions. (McDonald 2010, p. 129)*

Having an office in close proximity to mentors also had the added bonus of offering the opportunity to shadow a lecturer who they could *'work best with ... who will listen and suits my learning style'* Hurst cited in (Murray, Stanley & Wright 2014, p. 394). As Anderson states it would allow the novice academic to *'observe behaviours how student issues were handled and to learn what were considered day-to-day essentials of the academic role'* (p. 206). Having access to a mentor allowed the newcomer the opportunity to observe how experienced academics prioritised different aspects of the role in the time allotted. To have as one participant stated, *'having some sort of street cred [credibility]'* (Boyd & Lawley 2009, p. 297) which allowed the novice to *'be more knowledgeable as to why they do it this way'* (Anderson 2009, p. 207) feel less excluded (Findlow 2011) and feel eventually comfortable in saying *'no to added requests for their time'* (Boyd & Lawley 2009, p. 297). Anderson (2009) noted in her study that those who survived a year displayed a more positive attitude: *'I feel that I have crossed the line ... from surviving to thriving ...'* (p.206).

#### Embodying resilience

For many years, the mainstay of a junior academic in an ongoing position has been teaching, with independent research a future expectation (Norton, Sonnemann & McGannon 2013) . Many who took up the academic positions in the studies came from a clinical teaching background and found the work *'endless'* (McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013, p. 50). One study participant stated:

*... when I started here, I thought I was just going to teach, go to class, mark my papers, simple as ... and then there was all that other stuff. I never expected that I would have to do research and write papers and ten billion other things! They never told me that when I went for the job! And then there were all the workshops and forums that are compulsory. (McDermid, Peters, John Daly, et al. 2013, p. 49)*

Times have changed and taking up a university appointment, with associated workload, is not as straightforward as it once was. As several of the studies found (Findlow 2011; McDermid, Peters, Daly, et al. 2013; Murray, Stanley & Wright 2014), the reality for many of the present-day academics, is that they are expected to take on immediate opportunities for leadership roles and to attract research funding (Coates & Goedegebuure 2012) whilst also carrying heavy teaching workloads (Findlow 2011).

The new academics demonstrated their resilience with the initial overwhelming work demands in various ways (Boyd & Lawley 2009). *'Balance'* was a term used in McArthur-Rouse's study as a strategy for coping. Participants looked for understanding about the culture as well as how to perform their role. They made a concerted effort to seek out



information from colleagues during informal meetings or would refer to a plan made at orientation, as they thought it was important to know how things worked. One of the participants said, it gave her confidence and strength:

*I think understanding how the organisation works ... How one builds up one's teaching load ... who to go to and who was leading on what ... the organisation, the machinery, the mechanics, the workings of it ...* (McArthur-Rouse 2008, p. 405)

Duffy (2013) uses the term '*stabilising*' rather than balance to refer to a coming to terms with the academic role, associated workload and faculty expectations. Stabilising occurred more smoothly for academics who gave time to make an affiliation with faculty values. These academics could see the long term picture ... '*If we don't develop lifelong learning and thinking skills, then how can we develop in the profession*'? (Findlow 2011, p. 127). Another saw that moving forward was also about learning and understanding the new reward system ... '*the highest rewards (e.g. promotion and tenure) are dependent on obtaining funded research without which progression is not going to happen*' (Schriner 2007, p. 148).

Coping with expectations takes time, effort and determination for the novices before they adopt the 'right' behaviours. Some studies have shown that progression can be achieved through time and perseverance but relying on time to adapt, means that capable nurse academics can be lost along the way. The pressure to be an active researcher as soon as they accept the job, is growing in all tertiary institutions and all new academics need to be willing to work hard and be resilient to evolving demands. Given that the transition can be as long as three years, (Findlow 2011) adaptability, effective support as well as resilience can be viewed as crucial to the early career nurse. Working hard and being tough enough to '*play the game*' (Gourlay 2011, p. 598) is important for those who want to build a career in academia. Early career academic nurses on a continuing contract must be prepared to play the game if they want a satisfying future academic career.

## **Discussion**

This review offers a collective insight into the attributes that novice nurse academics have, identified as necessary for thriving within the tertiary sector. The work expectations have been rapidly changing for the academic and by the institution. An academic does not necessarily become *employed* for life but is *employable* for the experience and skills that they bring to enhance the organisation and their discipline. In other words, with this new covenant, the academic enters into a shared responsibility for developing and building their academic career. With previous commitments, academics were more likely to entrust major decisions affecting their careers to the institution, resulting in what has been described as '*having a dependent employee and a relatively static workforce with a set of static skills*' McIlveen et al. (2011 p. 150). Under the emerging covenant, organisations are required to present opportunities and open environment for academics to develop however, it must

remain the academic's responsibility to manage his or her own career trajectory. The anticipated result being that at a time of high competitiveness, early nurse academic nurses become career-resilient and to thrive in a tertiary environment.

A career-resilient academic that has been highlighted in this review may be viewed as one who is: dedicated to the idea of continuous learning; stands ready to reinvent themselves; to keep pace with change; take responsibility for their own career management; and lastly who is committed to the organisation's success. For each academic, this means staying knowledgeable about research trends and understanding the skills and behaviours required for the future functioning of the organisation. It also means being aware of one's own skills, of one's strengths and weaknesses, and having a plan for enhancing one's performance and long-term career. It means having the willingness and ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing tertiary needs.

Guidance concerning career opportunities can come from the institution, but the ability to be willing to adapt, to cope with expectations and adopt early independence behaviours are individual attributes of prime importance to making the most of the opportunities available. An academic who is constantly benchmarking and updating their skills is one that not only responds to change but anticipates it. Keeping close to the changes required, staying on top of new skills and research trends, striving to be ever more flexible makes for a valued employee and tertiary institutions have a lot to gain from encouraging such career resilient academics. But, there is also an immediate reason to adopt this approach. As evidenced by the early career academic nurses, rather than a top down approach to career planning, academics are beginning to demand a partnership or at the very least support in helping them to gain their career goals.

It would seem a valuable use of time for faculty and individuals if at job entry; early career academics had exposure to appropriate career developing situations. This would be an investment for the faculty and be also significant for the newcomer's career development. A career is after all, a day-to-day micro-development of honing skills and techniques and the sooner commenced in the correct way, the better for all concerned.

### **Limitations**

There were limitations in the preparation of this review. During the literature search only papers written in English were included. While only one of the authors screened the nine articles, all authors communicated regularly to critically discuss the studies under review, theme development and resulting attributes. Furthermore, generalisability of the results to other academics might be limited given that only early career academic nurse were included.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the nine qualitative studies offer valuable insights by novice academic nurses. Early career academic nurses belong to a discipline that is still relatively new to academe but once employed the institution can assist them on their journey. As individuals however, each person makes the journey into academia by different routes and at a different pace. What is needed is assistance in attainment of the 'right' behaviours at the 'right' time to succeed in career planning. Evidence of individual achievements are an expectation of a growing career and a portfolio is a tool that has been shown to be purposefully and individually interactive for the individual (Borgen, Amundson & Reuter 2004). A portfolio can be likened to what Noer (2009) has called a '*personal contract*' with the workplace and with self. Lent & Brown (2013) also emphasise the importance of '*personal career preparedness*' (Collin 2011) as a complement to planning and construction. In their view, planning must have an element of '*moving on*' at a rate appropriate to the candidate and a portfolio can monitor this process as it occurs. Their view is that while people may prepare for entering a field of work, they do not adequately scan for obstacles and issues that can delay personal success. Scanning the environment is important in answering questions concerning available opportunities. What do I need to be aware of as I think about my career? What and who are my resources that will support growth and development (Hall et al. 2004). Effective career planners require persistence and resilience (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri & Murdock 2012) and the 'right' mentor at the appropriate time (Halcomb et al. 2014) in order to achieve 'active planning of career development' (p. 21). Faculties gain when early career academics are valued as individuals and support them to achieve their goals.

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