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Research career development: The importance of establishing a solid track record in nursing academia



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Summary Academic status and achievement is increasingly influenced by research income and outputs with nursing academics experiencing considerable pressure to perform in these areas. As a result funding and career opportunities are becoming more competitive. Establishing expertise and a sound track record is crucial for success at both the individual and organisational level. However, despite their importance, methods to effectively establish a track record have received limited attention in the literature. The aim of this paper is to articulate the need for and provide advice for achieving a strategic approach to develop a solid and competitive track record. Practical tips are provided to facilitate the development of productive research teams with clear and logical contributions from each member, having a dissemination plan to maximise research outputs, and remaining focused on specific areas of content expertise. It is intended that these tips will assist individuals and academic units with to develop a stronger track record that may increase the likelihood of success in obtaining competitive funding.
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Introduction

It is understood in nursing academia that career pathways and promotion reflect research activity and success considerably more than they do teaching and administrative activity (Roberts & Turnbull, 2004; Smith, Crookes, Else, & Crookes, 2012; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011; Taylor & Cantrell, 2006; Worrall-Carter & Snell, 2003). In Australia an expanding proportion of research funding to academic units is directly attached to research performance, increasing the pressure placed on nurse academics to secure competitive funding and produce quality publications (Borbasi, Emden, & Jackson, 2005; Roberts & Turnbull, 2005; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011; Worrall-Carter & Snell, 2003). Track record is identified as an essential element for grant funding success (Borbasi et al., 2005; Emden, 1998).

Initially being a new discipline in the academic arena was seen as prohibitive to achieving grant success primarily because of weak track records (Emden, 1998). While considerable advances have been made in research productivity in Australia, nursing has been identified as remaining considerably behind some other disciplines in terms of research income and outputs (Roberts & Turnbull, 2002). However, it is important to note the impressive performance of nursing as a discipline in the Excellence in Research Australia exercise (Davidson, Duffield, & Daly, 2011; Wilkes & Jackson, 2011). However, there are some encouraging recent examples of high outputs amongst nurses in Australia, as well as the UK, and Canada (Hunt, Cleary, Jackson, Watson, & Thompson, 2011; Sasso, 2011; Thompson & Watson, 2010). More recently high teaching and administrative workloads are identified as a major barrier to the establishment of a successful research career (Roberts & Turnbull, 2004).

Strategies to address this situation include mentorship opportunities (Roberts & Turnbull, 2004; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011), research leadership (Stockhausen & Turale, 2011), and the establishment of a research culture (Cooke & Green, 2000; Roberts & Turnbull, 2004; Worrall-Carter & Snell, 2003). Unfortunately these essential ingredients have often been found lacking (Borbasi et al., 2005; Roberts & Turnbull, 2004; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011; Worrall-Carter & Snell, 2003). While research suggests that nurses value mentorship, most identify limited availability with a significant proportion reporting never having received it (Turnbull, 2010; Turnbull & Roberts, 2005). Research demonstrates the importance of influential and sustained mentorship and its positive role in the development of a successful research career (Steiner, Curtis, Lanphear, Vu, & Main, 2004).

Various frameworks measure the output of academic departments and their staff. For example, the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative has increased the pressure for nurse academics to establish successful research careers (Australian Research Council, 2011; Wilkes & Jackson, 2011; Williams, 2011), as ERA is likely to impact on funding allocations in the future and the reputation of the institution. In the UK, the new proposed system relies more on a range of statistical measures, which may include all non-government research income, number of postgraduates, and a bibliometric analysis of its research output, a particular concern, to determine how research funds are allocated (Watts, 2009). Those staff employed on a contractual basis are particularly vulnerable as without a

publication or funding track record it is less likely that their contract will be renewed. The pressure to publish, achieve funding and demonstrate the impact of the research will therefore increase and nurse academics need to be ready to meet that challenge (Cleary, Siegfried, Jackson, & Hunt, 2013).

The primary focus of the literature has been on facilitating the opportunities and environment for nurse academics to engage in research as the mechanism for establishing a track record. However, literature which articulates what a track record is and considers ways to promote a strategic approach to obtaining a track record at both the individual and organisational level is limited. The aim of this paper is to provide a practical guide to developing a strategic approach to the development of a strong research track record for individuals and academic units to achieve success in securing research funding.

Track record: quality or quantity?

Essentially establishing a track record with regards to acquiring grants is about ensuring the granting body that the team can and will do what they have outlined in the grant if they are successful in achieving the funding. Past performance is the key component, both by establishing expertise and demonstrating the ability to complete high quality work, meet the stipulated performance requirements in a timely manner and deliver within the prescribed budget.

'Publish or perish', a common academic mantra appears to reinforce the focus on productivity and output (Cleary & Walter, 2004) and resources have frequently been aimed at encouraging nurse academics to publish more and at enhancing the quality of publications to increase the likelihood of success (McVeigh et al., 2002; Rickard et al., 2009). More recently attention has also been directed towards the quality (McVeigh et al., 2002; Turnbull, 2010; Wilkes & Jackson, 2011) and impact of journals reflected by the expression 'be cited or perish' (Hunt, Cleary, & Walter, 2010). However, beyond this there remains little attention given to the subject matter. Nurse academics consequently are encouraged to think more about how much to write and where to write for than *what* they are writing about.

While productivity is important, establishing expertise is at least equally so. This is evident when applying for research funding, particularly the more prestigious grants such as National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council (Borbasi et al., 2005; Cooke & Green, 2000; Emden, 1998; Emden & Borbasi, 2000; Smith et al., 2012; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011). In assessing the track record of individual researchers and the team as a whole, reviewers tend to focus on publications and previous funding that is specifically relevant to the research topic of this particular application. Prior evidence of the research team working together and their capability to undertake the planned study is also advantageous (Cleary, Walter, & Hunt, 2006).

Researchers who have published in a broad range of areas with little connection to one another may find themselves placed at a disadvantage because they have not built on previous work, and appear to be 'firing shots in the air' hoping to hit something, rather than focusing on identifying and

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