



## Review

## 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.

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### 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.

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### 1. 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 and 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 et al., 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 and 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.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design

#### 2.1.1. 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.

#### 2.1.2. 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.

#### 2.1.3. 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 (Tables 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).

#### 2.1.4. Data Analysis and Synthesis

Qualitative analysis was carried out using a 'flow model'. This model has three 'types of analysis activity' (Miles and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. 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 and 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 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 and 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 and Lawley, 2009; Findlow, 2011; McArthur-Rouse, 2008) and only one study had the analysis viewed by several researchers (Boyd and Lawley, 2009).

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