

# Top tips when starting a career in academic nursing

Massey, Debbie  
Ion, Robin,  
Jackson, Debra

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## **Top tips when starting a career in academic nursing**

Unlike many academic disciplines, nursing is a relative newcomer to the academy. Subject areas such as philosophy, chemistry and mathematics have far far longer histories in the University environment, and over time they have developed disciplinary cultures which, to varying degrees, act to guide initiates. This is much less the case in our new and still emerging discipline. Moreover, where the typical academic in the traditional subjects enters their chosen profession at a relatively young age and following completion of a doctorate, the new nurse academic is likely to be older and much less likely to hold a doctoral degree on commencement of their academic career. They will invariably have had a previous career and, in many cases, will have operated at a senior or advanced level where they felt comfortable and respected.

For many, the move into academia is both the exciting realisation of a long-held ambition, but also mark a period of brutal disorientation. Here the certainties of previous roles disappear to be replaced by self-doubt, anxieties about competence and a fear of making a mistake – feelings which may not have been experienced with such frequency and intensity since the individual's time as a student nurse. New nursing academics may find themselves working in isolation, yet left with great responsibility as they take on the role of complex course management, providing academic advice and guidance on student progression, establish research careers, try to navigate the maze of university policies and procedures and fully understand what is expected of them. If they have come from areas where team work is a given, they may struggle with the competitive individualism which may characterize their new workplace

Without support, encouragement and guidance, it may be some years before the new nurse academic has the confidence and space to fully embrace and feel confident in their role. In this paper, we draw on our collective experience as teachers, researchers and managers with responsibility for leadership, staff development, governance and strategy, in order to identify and share the approaches we have found helpful in building our own academic careers. We hope that these strategies will provide a useful framework/lens for new, emerging and experienced academics as they consolidate and develop their roles.

- 1. *Take the time to properly understand the job*** – Research papers around transitioning nurse academics show that many new academics do not fully appreciate the scope of the role. Even though for many new nurse academics the focus is often on teaching and all that goes with it, there are normally several major domains of activity that tend to be associated with academic life, such as teaching, research, academic governance and community engagement. It is important to understand that performing really well in one area does not mitigate failure to perform in other areas so we have to aim to show activity across all of them. Many nurses only really start to understand the full breadth of academic job requirements when they fail to get a promotion or something else happens to make them realise the need to perform well in a number of areas beyond teaching and learning activities.
- 2. *Develop and regularly revisit your own personalised plan for career development*** – Careers are not built in a day. They take time to grow and mature, and taking a strategic approach over time can reap great rewards. When thinking about career planning, take the time to locate and read the major areas of activity that will be used to make decisions around promotion. Your institution will have 4-5 key domains and you need to have a plan to show achievement across all of them. Thus, as stated above, it is really important to familiarize yourself with what is required and to develop some personal short and longer term goals. These goals should be reviewed each year, and every year should feature at least one

measurable achievable career goal. In a sense the CV is the artifact that is being produced – keep it up to date. Every year it should be looking stronger. Various strategies can facilitate this. One of us (DJ) used to have a system where at the end of every year she would critically reflect on also seek peer feedback of her CV. This review process would help her set the career goal for the following year. Another of us (DM) has her CV on her desktop, and every research, learning and teaching and service output is entered into the document, thus her CV acts as a portfolio of achievements.

- 3. *Build and nurture a strong professional network*** – Successful academic careers are built on strong networks. Look at the successful people around you and consider the networks they have made and use. These networks can often be seen in the research teams people work with that are often established and nurtured over years. It is through these networks and connections that we can build success across the various domains of academic life. In building a networks it is important to look within and without of our own departments and institutions. Surround yourself with people who are enabling and supportive. Stay in touch. Thank people who help you. Stay connected to nursing organisations and events. Engage with social media - Twitter is a great platform to collaborate and access support. The three of us who authored this editorial met through Twitter and we have been using this platform to work and collaborate for a number of years. Conferences also offer an opportunity to network and meet other academics.
- 4. *Practice collegial generosity*** – Academic life is a great privilege but there are also pressures and so sometimes when under pressure people do not always be as collegial as they might be and sometimes joy stealing, and intimidation can negatively impact the work environment. So it's important to be good colleague to others. Our experience of academia has enabled us to identify that generosity, inclusiveness, helpfulness, kindness and thoughtfulness are all important elements of collegial environment. With experience, you will learn which of your colleagues display these important traits. However, we cannot be responsible for how others behave, only for how we behave and we think it is important to model and embody collegial generosity. Be the colleague you would want to have.
- 5. *Find a mentor*** - Academic mentoring is very important and can make a huge difference to how you develop and grow your career. It may take some time to identify a mentor and you may have more than one mentor. The multifaceted role of the academic means that research, learning and teaching and engaging with the profession are all important elements of the role. You may decide you need a mentor for each of these elements or you may identify one area that you require help, development and support with. Your mentor may work in or outside of your institution. The key to a good mentor relationship is not friendship but constructive feedback, respect and growth for both the mentor and the mentee. Once you have identified a mentor you will need to approach them and ask them to be your mentor - this could be a formal or informal request. However, it is important that you clearly outline what you need from the relationship, what your aims are and what support you require and what and how you will contribute to the relationship.
- 6. *Ask for help*** – academic work has many differences to clinical nursing work and this makes the transition challenging and difficult. It can be isolating, and it may appear that everyone else is busy and knows exactly what they need to do, while you feel uncertain and unsure. But actually, you will find that many of us experience a sense of uncertainty sometimes – certainly when we were new to academic life, so do reach out to others. In comparison to clinical practice where the work is very structured with clear timelines, academia can appear loose and unstructured. As an academic, you are responsible for your diary and managing your workload. This is autonomy and flexibility is an enormous privilege but can also be

overwhelming and confronting. Seek advice from experienced academics about how they manage their diary and their time. All of us (hopefully !!) allocate research time in our diary, and teaching preparation and allocate an hour break for lunch. It can be useful to have set days for student meetings and allow yourself some 'quiet time' to actually work on emails and other essential activities. Do not let your diary fill up with meetings leaving you inadequate time for other work.

- 7. Take full advantage of being on a university campus every day** – It is an enormous privilege to be able to walk on to a university campus every working day. We are fortunate to work in a sector in which achievement and growth are valued. Most universities have whole departments dedicated to developing staff and we urge you to take advantage of what is on offer to develop you and equip you with the skills and knowledge to be the best you can be. In addition, many universities have sabbatical and other programs to support study and international collaborations. Universities also offer professional development opportunities in learning and teaching, grant writing and publishing your work. Make sure you access and use these opportunities – they will help develop your skills and make you a better academic.
- 8. Practice pro-active self-care** – Academics are well known for working long hours and there is potential to have a poor work life balance. It is important that you can have an open, transparent and honest discussion with your supervisor about your workload allocation. Make sure you familiarize yourself with the workload allocation tool used in your organization. Before you say yes to any extra work or activities ask yourself how this meets your long-term career goals. Do not be afraid to say no – this may be one of the hardest things to learn to do as a nurse academic. Practicing self-care also ensures you prioritise time for yourself and your family, eat well, get enough sleep, and engage in health-giving activities such as exercise. As an academic you will also need to learn to manage and deal with rejection and disappointment. This can be the rejection of a manuscript for publication, student evaluations and unsuccessful grant application. You will find time out and reflecting and debriefing with friends and colleagues will help you to learn from and manage these challenges.
- 9. Be realistic with what you can achieve – do not over commit yourself** – this is a lesson that many of us have learned the hard way! Academic life brings with it many opportunities and responsibilities. You cannot do everything and you need to make choices about what you can commit to. Better to commit to fewer things and do them well (and get a name for being reliable), than taking on too much and not being able to deliver. This will only make you feel pressured and perhaps a bit disappointed in yourself.
- 10. Use technology to optimize performance and make best use of time** - Universities spend a lot of resource on various platforms to enhance teaching, to facilitate communications and save time on meetings. Make use of these, if you are unfamiliar with the tools used in your organization book a time with an expert and ensure you become competent and familiar with them.
- 11. Respect your own time and the time of others** - In today's world many people are very time poor and academics are no exception. Be thoughtful with how you use time. Be a good time manager. Do not waste other people's time and do not allow your own time to be wasted. If you call a meeting, prepare properly, have an agenda and ensure you get through the agenda in a timely way. Do not allow your meeting to be hijacked, and ensure you stick to the planned agenda. Academics have a certain amount of autonomy and so choose your meetings carefully. Just because someone calls a meeting does not mean you need to go. When being called to a meeting, consider the impact of your attendance.

**12. Enjoy and celebrate being a nursing academic.** Being an academic is a privilege, you are able to make a positive and long lasting impact on the future of nursing, on clinical practice and importantly on patient safety. You should celebrate this achievement every day and reflect on the positive impact you have made and will continue to make to nursing.

Debbie Massey, Southern Cross University, Australia.

Robin Ion, Abertay University, Dundee, UK.

Debra Jackson, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.