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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

developing an area of strength, developing expertise and disseminating that expertise through a variety of media to ensure that expertise is acknowledged. This applies equally to the team as a whole; the contribution of each member of the team should be clearly evident and well-articulated in the proposal. The inclusion of the 'token expert' with grant and publication success that does not relate to the grant application is easily identified and is more likely to be viewed as the attempts of a team lacking confidence in its expertise to artificially elevate their status and competiveness.

This trend can also occur at the academic unit. In the attempts to increase the academic outputs and competitive income of the School or Department, nurse academics with track record may be pressured to include novice researchers on publications and grant applications. While mentorship is an important part of research training (Hawkins & Fontenot, 2009; Roberts & Turnbull, 2004; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011; Turnbull, 2010; Turnbull & Roberts, 2005), the integrity and competitiveness of the research team must remain the paramount concern and 'honorary' researcher on a research protocol is no different to other problematic behaviours in publishing (Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2013).

The logic test

In establishing research teams it is important to consider whether the alignment of researchers is a logical one. Where possible, junior academics and early career researchers should be matched with researchers with a track record in a similar or complementary field. Researchers from different backgrounds or disciplines can also work together to form a team which becomes stronger through the collective expertise. For example, a research project examining the physical health care needs of people diagnosed with a mental illness may be strengthened by including a nurse academic with a background in diabetes. If the latter nurse academic does not have a strong research track record at this stage, he or she is able to contribute in other ways including clinical expertise, and leveraging relationships with relevant industry partners, to facilitate access for research and as mechanism for translating research findings into practice.

This collaborative exchange facilitates communication between settings, which can also increase awareness of professional development education opportunities and over time, may assist in building future teams that are valuable for both research and education (Cleary, Walter, Horsfall, & Matheson, 2009). To some extent it also meets a common concern for nurse researchers who are working in academic settings, about how best to develop a meaningful career whilst staying in touch with practice (Taylor & Cantrell, 2006). It is however important to choose appropriate granting bodies for this approach and some caution is warranted when considering pharmaceutical companies. Highly competitive research funds are likely to take a much stricter definition of track record, with the need for all members to have significant runs on the board and evidence of previous successful collaborations. Other granting bodies are less strict and sometimes it is a requirement to include at least one novice researcher as a deliberate strategy to build capacity. There are also specialised grants and scholarships available for early career researchers, and these should be actively sought.

The key question therefore for any research team (and arguably this would apply equally to publications and higher degree supervision) is does this team make sense? Do all members have something to offer? What do they have to offer that is not readily available from other members of the team? Is there a balance achieved between the strength of past performance and capacity building for novice and early career researchers (where relevant)? It is advised that any research team address this issue specifically.

Expertise is an important component of a successful team but it is clearly not the only one. Trust and the ability to work together in a collegial and constructive way is essential (Happell, 2010). It is essential not to pay 'lip service' to the notion of teamwork, it is not a euphemism for working with friends or using a research opportunity as a way to pay back favours from the past. Instead the research team should be assembled with integrity and at the outset expectations of each member defined, and roles and responsibilities delineated. This includes authorship protocols, as being named as an advisor for example, would not necessarily mean automatic inclusion as an author on any output arising from the study. Again the logic test applies and the team needs to make sense and be defensible.

Becoming strategic

The most effective way to develop a track record from both an individual and organisational perspective is to be strategic. For the beginning academic this means identifying an area of research and preferably one that builds on clinical expertise, holds sufficient interest for the researcher and has clear and tangible outcomes, preferably with a clear link to desirable changes in practice. Fundamentally researchers need to be able to answer the 'so what' question effectively, articulating the impact the research will have and how the outcomes will change practice. Establishing the rationale is possibly the most important component of a grant application. The best quality grant will be readily discarded if it is not able to clearly articulate how it will make a difference.

Higher degree by research topics

Frequently new academics have completed, are currently undertaking or contemplating commencing a higher degree by research. This is the point from which strategic thinking should commence. Those who have not commenced should be encouraged to think strategically about the topic, the following questions may assist in selecting a topic (Cleary, Happell, Walter, & Hunt, 2013):

- What are your career aspirations and how would a higher degree qualification enhance them?
- What are the major issues facing your professional/research area? An appropriate research topic may be located within discussion of these issues
- To what extent are contemporary issues likely to remain relevant into the short, medium and long term future? It is important that the relevance of one's research agenda

remain relevant over time, and better still keep you ahead of the pack!
- How does the topic relate to other professional roles you are engaged in?
- Is the topic sufficiently interesting to sustain motivation over time?

These questions are equally important for postdoctoral research work. Ideally this research should build on the expertise gained and the networks established from the higher degree programme.

Plan for dissemination of information

The next step to consider is the dissemination plan. For new academics actually doing the research and submitting final reports can be time consuming enough. Hence, disseminating findings can easily become one of those things that remains at the end of the 'to do' list. Not only is dissemination of information to stakeholders an academic responsibility (Cleary, Walter, & Luscombe, 2007; Wilkes & Jackson, 2011), it is also a closely scrutinised aspect of researcher track record for funding applications (Cleary et al., 2006). It represents another way of showing funding bodies that the individual or team can not only do the work but can ensure it is shared with the relevant communities. Its impact on the establishment and maintenance of track record can therefore not be underestimated.

Higher degree students may be tempted to prioritise the completion of their programme and therefore defer publishing their work until after this time, however publishing is considered integral to the process and viewed favourably by examiners (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hunt, 2011). For part time PhD students who can spend six or more years completing their degree, this would represent a significant and unnecessary delay in establishing track record with several potential missed opportunities. It also increases the likelihood that others publishing in the same area will capture the market and claim the expertise.

A dissemination plan is therefore important for the new academic who is likely to be overwhelmed with teaching and administration duties as well as the higher degree, because without the plan dissemination simply will not happen. In addition a plan will help to consider where to publish and how best to reach the target audience. Academic publications in refereed journals are the most obvious source and will result in the greatest kudos from the university; refereed journals with impact factors, and publications linked to grants or higher degree studies, are considered one of the best ways to get the ''runs on the board''.

Publication in the broader professional and public media should also be considered as a way to establish expertise and to increase the likelihood that research outcomes will be translated into practice. This shows a level of productivity and demonstrates that your work has been subject to scrutiny by colleagues and the broader community, all of which contribute to a solid track record. It should be noted however, that these outcomes are not necessarily counted in academia, and are precluded from being listed as output on research grants. Publication in these forums may also preclude further publication of research output in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., considered a duplicate publication). A good mentor with an established track record who is familiar with ethics in publishing and career trajectories can provide helpful advice and guidance in this regard.

Dissemination should be progressive and ongoing and should reflect a broad audience, for example:

- Refereed publications. This is the most appropriate way to reach the academic community and maximise the citations of this work in other academic journals (Cleary, Walter, Jackson, & Daly, 2013).
- Local, national and international conferences. Although not as prestigious it provides an opportunity to network with others with similar interests, and may lead to collaborations and subsequently a stronger team track record.
- Professional media — Professional magazines (for example, *Australian Nurses Journal*, *Nursing Standard* and *Nursing Review*) and newsletters. These are generally shorter and less academic in style. They are likely to be read by much larger numbers of nurses than refereed journals and are an excellent way to disseminate the practice implications of research.
- Public media — Press releases, Letters to the Editor. Research that addresses health outcomes will be of interest to the general population so it is important to target the areas they are likely to access.
- Social media — Facebook, twitter and blogs are all opportunities to get the message out to a broad audience with a vested interest in your work.

Establishing profile

In addition to research outputs, profile can be established through strengthening professional networks. Involvement in the appropriate professional nursing organisation representing your specialty is an important way to make a professional contribution and have your expertise in doing so recognised. Furthermore, it provides another opportunity to establish networks and identify potential collaborators. Being a member is necessary but of its own, insufficient. The level of contribution may be seen to reflect commitment. Holding an office such as president or secretary also provides the opportunity to influence direction. Membership of Editorial Boards of journals related to your field of expertise is another way to gain exposure, develop skills and make an important contribution to leadership and the development of knowledge in your field.

Broadening spheres of influence

Nursing research has (or should have) implications for policy and/or practice. It is never too soon to use research findings with influential intent. Nurse academics are frequently invited to join committees and workload balance is often a deciding factor as to whether to accept or decline. It is important to wear the strategic hat and consider what you have to offer as well as what you (and your research) can gain from this involvement. If the committee is related to your research work and your expertise is sought then acceptance is advisable. In addition, it would appear to be a good investment of time if it provides the opportunity to meet people

who could assist you with your research through access to participants; opportunities for funding; or facilitating the translation of research findings. Joining committees for the sake of adding them to your CV is rarely a successful strategy and one should not engage in CV padding or misrepresenting one's achievements/contributions, with the aim of inflating one's record to secure an unfair advantage over other others in competitive endeavours (Cleary, Walter, et al., 2013). It is much preferred to be honest and judicious and ensure that your contribution is genuine and meaningful.

Keeping the 'track' in track record

This can often be the hard part, the temptation to divert your attention to another project because there is a funding source or it seems interesting can be very strong, and equally powerful can be the pressure to include others in your project as a sign of friendship or collegiality. It is very unlikely however that a scatter gun approach will be result in any sustainable success, and considerable time and energy can be invested in a grant application with little likelihood of reaping the rewards. Of course the odds of grant success remain relatively low even for proposals within one's area of expertise. However, remaining strategic means that the work invested in the application remains valuable despite the outcome. If the grant is not successful, the application can be further developed for other funding bodies or consideration given to a preliminary study to collect pilot data, which may enhance the likelihood of future grant success. Any feedback provided by the grant reviewers can be taken on board and the application can continually be improved with the aim of eventual success. Opportunistic applications tend to be one off and the opportunity for learning and development may be limited.

The same thinking should be applied at the academic unit level. Schools of Nursing need to take a strategic approach to developing track record and allocate resources accordingly. This process commonly referred to as programmatic research (Borbasi et al., 2005; Emden & Borbasi, 2000) involves academic units investing in areas of existing and emerging strength with a view to developing track record and enhancing research funding success. This approach has also been widely criticised for imposing research areas or topics on academic staff and stifling intellectual growth (Borbasi et al., 2005; Emden & Borbasi, 2000). However, the authors of this paper contend than the rules of strategic thinking are as important at the organisational level as they are at the individual level and the concentration on specific research areas is warranted.

Conclusions

The importance of good quality research to inform nursing policy and practice is essential for achieving positive and effective consumer outcomes and for advancing the profession of nursing. Securing research funding and publishing in quality, refereed journals is an increasing expectation in contemporary academia. As competition increases, track record becomes increasingly significant in determining the success or otherwise of funding applications. Taking a strategic approach on individual, team and organisational levels will enhance competitiveness and the likelihood of positive outcomes. Some useful pointers for establishing a sound track record include

- Get a good mentor!
- Seek to develop a national and international reputation.
- Present work at local, national and international conferences.
- Apply for grants no matter how small.
- Seek to publish work in peer reviewed journals.
- Develop a profile in the community.
- Become actively involved in professional organisations.
- Accept invitations to review manuscripts for journals.
- Assemble research teams with complementary expertise.

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