

Clinical Academic Career Pathway for Nursing and Allied Health Professionals¹

Clinical Academic Role Descriptors:

The clinical academic pathway outlined below highlights the range of typical practice and research-focused activities that a practitioner on a clinical academic career pathway might normally engage in at different levels and points along this career path. The activities are intended as a guide for practitioners interested in learning more about the practice and research components of a clinical academic career, as well as those already employed in clinical academic roles. They may also be useful for health care organisations and Higher Education Institutions as a tool for developing clinical academic roles.

What is a clinical academic practitioner?

A clinical academic practitioner combines and integrates both clinical and academic work, rather than being obliged to pursue one role at the expense of the other. This integration of clinical knowledge and academic practice is then used to positively impact on patient outcome and improve service delivery. Clinical academic roles provide opportunities for practitioners to develop and advance knowledge and skills in both research and clinical practice simultaneously, and to synthesise these to enhance both theirs and others' research and practice. Clinical academic roles offer flexible career opportunities that sustain and develop clinical skills whilst becoming proficient researchers and educators (UKCRC 2007).

What are the benefits of clinical academic roles?

Clinical academic roles allow practitioners to combine roles in, and integrate knowledge, skills and experience in, clinical practice and research². The clinical academic practitioner uses knowledge and experience of clinical practice to inform the research process and uses research and evidence to improve the quality and efficiency of clinical practice. This means that research is focused on finding solutions to problems that matter most to patients, their families and the NHS, and clinical practice is informed by evidence about what works and is best for patients, their families and the NHS.

The clinical academic role descriptors

The UKCRC (2007) recommendations on clinical academic careers seek to establish a clearly identified and properly resourced career track for a proportion of practitioners who wish to pursue a clinical academic career and who are likely to lead future programmes of clinical and health related research.

Drawing on our experience of clinical academic posts at the University of Southampton³, the pathway and the activities outlined below represent our vision for a clinical academic pathway that begins early in a practitioner's career, with opportunities to begin postgraduate research combined and integrated with clinical practice at the beginning of a career pathway at level 5. We believe that there is a need to capture talent and develop it from an early stage. We recognise that this is a departure from current practice, where practitioners often acquire extensive clinical experience before they are able to take up opportunities to embark on postgraduate research study.

Our clinical academic roles and the pathway developed at Southampton have been modelled on a clinical academic pathway that begins at level 5 and has the potential to develop from there through to the highest level of practice at level 9. Levels identified here are comparable with the levels outlined in the NHS Career Framework. Whilst these levels do not explicitly match with Agenda for Change Bands, for the purposes of this document there is sufficient commonality to broadly translate these levels into Agenda for Change banding for example, a Level 5 (NHS Career Framework) equates to a Band 5 (Agenda for Change).

The activities outlined below reflect this vision and our experience of developing and working with clinical academic posts in our clinical academic pathway. Whilst they reflect a plan for a new generation of clinical academic career practitioners, we hope that the activities outlined will also be useful as a guide to practitioners currently working at different levels in clinical academic roles with a variety of clinical and research experience.

¹This title is not intended to be exclusive to these professionals. However, this document has been developed based on our experience with Nursing and AHP clinical academics. It has yet to be tested in the Midwifery or Health Visiting context.

²The pathway outlined here focuses on research-focused clinical academic roles, rather than education-focused clinical academic roles.

³Posts funded by South Central Strategic Health Authority, and operating in partnership with Southampton University NHS Hospitals Trust, Solent Healthcare and Basingstoke and North Hants NHS Foundation Trust.

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A practitioner wishing to pursue a clinical academic career may have early opportunities to begin to develop learning and experiences relevant to this career pathway as an under-graduate during their initial professional preparation period. Following initial registration, a practitioner following a clinical academic pathway typically gains early clinical experience in a research-rich clinical practice environment, maintaining links with research. Alternatively they could undertake clinical practice whilst being research active working in a research role.

Level 5

Level 5: Clinical academic role summary

At level 5, a clinical academic practitioner is developing skills in evidence-based practice and seeks out opportunities to affect clinical decisions and enhance patient outcomes in their own clinical area. They will demonstrate competencies commensurate with clinical band 5 in their clinical setting and this may require additional specialised clinical skills acquisition. They will also be gaining further clinical research experience, and/or be working towards a research-focused Masters qualification. This may lead to undertaking doctoral clinical research for a PhD qualification later at this level or at the next level.

A clinical academic level 5 practitioner will be undertaking clinical and research activities that are important to patients, their families and/or the health care organisation in which the practitioner works. The outcome of this is to inform best practice and quality care in the organisation.

Level 5 (MClin Res, MRes, PhD student)/ Clinical Academic:

- Develops competence and confidence in clinical practice acquiring the required specialists skills and expertise
- Critically appraises evidence and evidence-based guidelines, drawing on knowledge of patient need, the practice environment and research to inform and develop own and other clinical team members' practice within own practice setting
- Uses literacy skills and the skills of systematic reviewing of the literature in order to identify, collate, critically appraise and synthesise sources of current knowledge underpinning clinical problems relevant to own practice setting in order to inform own and other team members' clinical practice
- Supports translation of research findings and implementation of evidence-based practice within own practice setting by seeking out opportunities to enhance clinical decisions and patient outcomes
- Act as an agent for change by evaluating evidence and implementing clinical innovations to influence local clinical practices through practice development, audit or education to improve patient pathways
- Uses own practice experience to identify clinical research problems as the basis for developing research question/s for own research and to inform the clinical agenda within own practice setting
- Develops and undertakes own post-graduate research study to address clinical practice problem with support from clinical and academic supervisors demonstrating skills to attend to research design, ethics, governance, access and data collection processes
- Identifies and develops local research and clinical networks to develop an evidence based culture that improves patient outcomes and experiences, and facilitates research knowledge and skills within clinical and academic teams

Level 6

Level 6: Clinical academic role summary

At level 6, a clinical academic practitioner will be refining his/her skills in evidence-based practice and will seek out opportunities to influence clinical decisions and patient outcomes related to their area of emerging clinical academic expertise. They will normally be working towards completing clinical research for a PhD and beginning early post-doctoral research activity, combined with an established role as an experienced practitioner within a specific practice area. The level 6 clinical academic practitioner contributes to enhancing the quality and efficiency of care delivery in the work environment through providing leadership and direction of care in a specific area whilst disseminating, testing and modelling research results, and influences others to use evidence to underpin practice within the work environment.

The level 6 clinical academic practitioner begins to contribute clinically focused, high impact research outputs and local service initiatives to inform and modernise patient programmes of care and build capacity and capability of clinically-focused research.

Level 6 (PhD Research Student/Research Fellow)/ Clinical Academic:

- Delivers and influences patient care through enhanced clinical and leadership skills
- Continues to develop own clinical academic practice through exhibiting an expert clinical knowledge base and developing new knowledge in the form of a doctoral thesis
- Acts as an internal consultant to other staff and students in own specialist area of clinical academic practice and influences their ability to provide evidence-based practice through informed clinical decision-making to maximise patient outcome
- Develops and contributes to a focused research programme within own emerging specialist area using detailed knowledge of the context of clinical care and patient need and different research methods and designs
- Demonstrates a reflexive approach to the results of their own research work in relation to development of their clinical practice, modelling the outcomes of their research in their clinical practice, and using their clinical practice as a testing ground for the implications of their research
- Raises own, University and healthcare provider profile through dissemination of new clinical academic knowledge (service initiatives, research outcomes) using presentations and publications in peer reviewed journals in local and national contexts
- Establishes and maintains research and clinical networks to use own research to impact on patient services and to facilitate engagement in post-doctoral research work programme
- Influences service and research strategy through contributing to bids for future service planning and research grants
- Develops a research active culture through developing other clinical research studies in emerging specialist area, to generate practice knowledge and contributing to writing bids for research grants in the area
- Disseminates and implements evidence-based practice within own specialist area, through an understanding of effective research, knowledge utilisation, change management and clinical leadership processes

Level 7

Level 7: Clinical academic role summary

At level 7, the clinical academic practitioner leads the provision of evidence-based practice and is a champion in a specialist clinical area, leading to changes that improve the quality of patient care. The clinical academic practitioner will be working towards a recognised post of expertise in his/her clinical practice area and in post-doctoral work. He/she will begin to conduct innovative clinical practice and clinical research in a clinical setting to help provide patient-focused solutions to key practice issues, disseminating research results through and beyond the organisation effecting wider practice change and contributing to the overall research profile of the health care and higher education organisations.

The level 7 clinical academic practitioner supports and supervises others' research and practice, and acts as an expert resource on the evidence base for her/his specialist area. She/he is developing a local and national profile as a clinical expert and is making a growing contribution to the research income and publications for the aligned clinical and academic organisations and to capacity-building and the development of clinical research teams in the specialist area.

Level 7 (Senior Research Fellow)/ Clinical Academic:

- Influences the delivery of direct care and service delivery through the demonstration of expert clinical skills
- Takes responsibility for leading the provision and implementation of evidence-based practice across their specialist area in their organisation
- Supports the development of evidence-based practice skills, research projects, and knowledge development of clinical and academic colleagues through acting as a role model, mentor and supervisor
- Acts as a specialist resource for clinical and research organisations about clinical research in own specialist practice area, advising on evidence-based patient pathway and service change
- Develops project management skills in the context of research and clinical project set up and execution, working with senior investigators in research and clinical teams
- Plans, develops and conducts innovative and high quality clinical research and service projects in own specialist area, collaborating with and/or supervising clinical and research teams in clinical setting/s and relevant University department/s
- Develops skills to disseminate research and service findings through a variety of methods and processes targeted for different audiences including general public, clinician and research audiences, as part of a growing national reputation for research and clinical academic work
- Establishes national reputation through proactive collaboration as a co-investigator with research and practice teams to develop research grant applications for national research funding
- Actively disseminates research findings and practice initiatives through specialist national research and clinical networks and publication in international peer reviewed journals

Level 8

Level 8: Clinical academic role summary

At level 8, the clinical academic practitioner leads evidence-based practice across an organisation, fostering collaborations to set local clinical research and quality improvement priorities. The post-holder will normally be working in a senior clinical academic role, developing and combining leadership in research and clinical practice. She/he leads a programme of clinical research, contributes to research capacity-building within a health care organisation, and leads evidence-based service development and transformation across the organisation.

The level 8 clinical academic practitioner enhances the national and international reputation of both health care and higher education institutions by attracting major research funding as part of a programme of research, leading to research and service improvement teams to deliver high quality, clinically focused clinical academic outputs from clinical research in the specialist area.

Level 8 (Reader)/ Consultant Practitioner) Clinical Academic:

- Identifies, directs and influences evidence-informed service provision and leads service transformation at clinical organisational level, and contributes to the development of research policy and strategy in the educational organisational setting
- Challenges practice through skilled observation, analysis, synthesis of internal and published evidence, and evaluation outcomes, using supportive, collaborative and participatory strategies
- Develops clinical colleagues' ability to engage in enhanced clinical and research activities, helping them to identify, frame and address clinical research problems, developing their change management and dissemination (conference and publication) skills to embed evidence-based practice
- Plans, shapes and leads on the direction and development of own programme of original, innovative and creative clinical research in own specialist area, setting up and managing resources to deliver it, and provides expert advice and subject leadership
- Acts as Principal Investigator for own research projects proactively developing, managing and supervising research teams, responsible for delivery of quality standards, team performance and output to funding bodies
- Acts as an international expert and uses professional, academic and policy networks to lead dissemination and impact evaluation of new clinical and research insights through high level presentations and publication in peer reviewed journals

Level 9

Level 9: Clinical academic role summary

At level 9, the clinical academic practitioner is working towards operating at the highest level of clinical academic practice, working strategically to plan, lead and manage a substantive clinical research area. She/he makes a significant and leading contribution to the organisational culture of the health care organisation through promoting research and evidence-based practice. She/he is a recognised international leader in clinical research and clinical academic practice.

Level 9 (Chair)/ (Clinical Professor) Clinical Academic

- Acts as a role model and promotes and leads a culture supporting evidence-informed service transformation within an organisation, providing and brokering opportunities at a high level, and mobilising the necessary resources to facilitate embedding service transformation across the organisation
- Leads a programme of outstanding quality clinical research, establishing and building major collaborative partnerships with other institutions or external bodies and overseeing staff teams and resource management processes necessary to deliver research plans
- Continues to develop and sustain an outstanding individual and organisational international reputation in the specialist area of clinical practice and clinical research, demonstrated through leading and securing major funding bids and successfully publishing in international peer reviewed journals
- Leads, oversees and champions the development, co-ordination and implementation of research strategy, informed by a critical analysis of organisational priorities
- Develops other senior academic and clinical staff and brokers opportunities for others to develop their careers in clinical academic practice and in high impact clinical research
- Provides expertise and leadership in specific clinical practice field and in clinical research based on widely recognised national and international eminence

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Reference

UK Clinical Research Collaboration (2007) Developing the best research professionals. Report of the UKCRC Sub-Committee for Nurses in Clinical Research (Workforce). London: UK Clinical Research Collaboration

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