

Clinical Academic Career Pathway for Nursing

Clinical Academic Role Descriptors: Research

The clinical academic pathway outlined below highlights the range of typical research-focused activities that a nurse on a clinical academic career pathway might normally engage in at different levels¹ and points along this career path. The activities are intended as a guide for nurses interested in learning more about the 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 nurse?

A clinical academic nurse combines and integrates both clinical and academic work, rather than being obliged to pursue one role at the expense of the other. The academic duties may include research, teaching or both. A clinical academic career for nurses brings together clinical excellence, research and teaching in a systemic relationship. It should offer flexible career opportunities that sustain and develop clinical skills and offer opportunities to become proficient researchers and educators (UKCRC 2007).

What are the benefits of clinical academic roles?

Clinical academic roles allow nurses to combine roles in, and integrate knowledge, skills and experience in, clinical practice and research². The clinical academic nurse 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.

Clinical academic roles provide opportunities for nurses 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.

The clinical academic role descriptors: research

The UKCRC (2007) recommendations on clinical academic careers seek to establish a clearly identified and properly resourced career track for a proportion of nurses 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 nurse's career, with opportunities to begin postgraduate research combined and integrated with clinical practice at level 5 and 6. 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 nurses 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 6 and has the potential to develop from there through to the highest level of practice at level 9. 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 nurses, we hope that the activities outlined will also be useful as a guide to nurses currently working at different levels in clinical academic roles with a variety of clinical and research experience.

¹ Levels identified here are comparable with the levels outlined in the NHS Career Framework. They do not describe Agenda for Change Bands.

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

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

Clinical Academic Role Descriptors: Research

A nurse wishing to pursue a clinical academic career may have opportunities to begin to develop learning and experiences relevant to this career pathway as an under-graduate. Following initial registration, a nurse following a clinical academic pathway typically gains early clinical experience in a research-rich clinical practice environment, maintaining links with research and / or maintains clinical practice whilst working in a research role.

Level 5

Level 5: Research role summary

At level 5 a clinical academic nurse 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 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 level 5 or early level 6.

A clinical academic level 5 nurse will be undertaking clinical research that is clearly focused on an issue or problem which has been identified as important to patients, their families and / or the health care organisation in which the nurse works. The outcomes of the research will contribute to informing best practice and quality care in the health care organisation. The level 5 clinical academic nurse forms part of the capacity- and capability-building activities of the University department.

Level 5 - Level 6 / MClin Res, MRes or PhD research student

- Identifies clinical nursing research problems as the basis for developing research question/s for own research and to inform clinical research studies within own practice setting
- Uses the skills of systematic reviewing of literature in order to identify, collate, critically appraise and synthesise current knowledge underpinning clinical problems relevant to own practice setting
- Uses information literacy skills to access evidence to inform own and other team members' clinical practice within own practice setting
- Critically appraises evidence and evidence-based guidelines, drawing on knowledge of research, to inform own and other team members' clinical practice within own practice setting
- Supports dissemination of research findings and implementation of evidence-based practice within own practice setting by seeking out opportunities to enhance clinical decisions and patient outcomes
- Assists with others' clinical research studies in own practice setting, with supervision from others as appropriate
- Develops a research proposal, with guidance from academic supervisor/s, based on knowledge and understanding of a range of research designs and methods
- Considers ethical implications of clinical research and negotiates access to data collection settings, including gaining approval via Research Ethics Committee and research governance processes, and local gatekeepers for purposes of conducting own postgraduate research study
- Using knowledge of research designs and methods, collects, analyzes and interprets data from own clinical research study, under supervision
- Identifies and develops research and clinical networks relevant to focus of own research, in order to maintain up-to-date research knowledge and disseminate study results

Level 6

Level 6: Research role summary

At level 6, a clinical academic nurse 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 expertise. They will normally be working towards completing clinical research for a PhD and beginning early post-doctoral research activity, combined with a focus on an emerging clinical specialist area. The level 6 clinical academic nurse contributes to enhancing the quality and efficiency of care delivery in the work environment through disseminating, testing and modelling of research results and influences others to use evidence to underpin practice within the work environment

The level 6 clinical academic nurse begins to contribute clinically focused, high impact research outputs to the profile of a University department, provides advice to other research and academic staff to enhance clinical research and contributes to attracting funding for clinically- focused research.

Level 6 / PhD research student / Research Fellow

- Completes analysis and interpretation of data, writes up and concludes own original clinical research study in the form of a doctoral thesis
- Disseminates new knowledge and insights gained from own research using presentations and publications in refereed journals in local and national contexts
- Demonstrates a reflexive approach to the results of their doctoral research in relation to the development of their clinical practice experience, 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
- Establishes and maintains research and clinical networks to disseminate own research and facilitate engagement in post-doctoral research
- Provides guidance to other staff and students in own specialist area of clinical research and influences their ability to provide evidence-based practice through clinical decision-making and influencing patient outcomes
- Contributes regularly to others' clinical research studies in own emerging specialist area, using detailed knowledge of different research designs and methods available for generating knowledge and may contribute to writing bids for research grants
- Disseminates and implements evidence-based practice within own specialist area, through an understanding of effective research, knowledge utilisation and change management processes

Level 7

Level 7: Research role summary

At level 7, the clinical academic nurse leads the provision of evidence-based practice and is a champion in a specialist research area, leading changes to improve the quality of patient care. The clinical academic nurse will be working towards consolidating his /her post-doctoral clinical research in his / her own specialist area. She / he begins to conduct innovative clinical research in the clinical environment to help provide solutions to key nursing issues, disseminates research results throughout and beyond the organisation and contributes to the overall research profile of the health care organisation.

The level 7 clinical academic nurse supports and supervises others' research, and acts as an expert resource on the evidence base for her / his specialist area. She /he is developing a growing contribution to the research income and publications of a University department and contributes to capacity-building and the development of research teams in his / her specialist area.

Level 7 / Senior Research Fellow

- Collaborates with research teams as a co-investigator to develop research grant applications to attract national research funding
- Plans, develops and conducts innovative and high quality clinical research in own specialist area, as part of own personal research plan, collaborating with and /or supervising clinical and research teams in clinical setting/s and relevant University department/s
- Develops project management skills, in the context of research project set up and execution, working with senior investigators in research and clinical teams
- Develops skills to disseminate research 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
- Publishes research findings in international peer reviewed journals
- Actively disseminates research findings through specialist national research and clinical networks
- Supports the development of evidence-based practice skills and knowledge development of junior clinical colleagues through acting as a role model and mentorship
- Takes responsibility for leading the provision and implementation of evidence-based practice across the organisation in their specialist area
- Supervises postgraduate research students in own specialist area of research and clinical practice and provides expert advice to other staff and students
- Acts as a specialist resource for clinical and research organisations for clinical research in own specialist area, advising on evidence base relevant to practice

Level 8

Level 8: Research role summary

At level 8, the clinical academic nurse 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 nurse enhances the national and international reputation of the University department by attracting major research funding as part of a programme of research, leading research teams to deliver high quality, clinically-focused research outputs from clinical research in the specialist area.

Level 8 / Reader

- Leads on the development of original, innovative and creative research grant applications in area of recognised excellence to attract major national research funding
- Conducts own research as Principal Investigator, proactively developing, managing and supervising research teams, and responsible for delivery of quality standards, team performance and output to funding bodies
- Plans, shapes and leads on the direction and development of own programme of clinical research in specialist area, setting up and managing resources needed to deliver it, and provides expert advice and subject leadership
- Uses established national and international networks to lead dissemination and impact evaluation of new insights generated from research results, through presentation and publication in international peer reviewed journals
- Develops clinical colleagues' ability to engage in clinical research activities – helping them to identify and frame research problems, disseminate findings through conferences and publication, and developing their change management skills
- Contributes to the development of research policy and strategy in Faculty and clinical organisational setting
- Identifies, directs and influences evidence-informed service provision and leads service transformation at organisational level
- Challenges practice through skilled observation, analysis, synthesis of internal and published evidence, and evaluation of outcomes, using supportive, collaborative and participatory strategies
- Acts as a national and international expert for clinical research in own specialist area

Level 9

Level 9: Research role summary

At level 9, the clinical academic nurse 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.

Level 9 / Professor

- 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 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
- Takes overall responsibility for a service area, department or clinical pathway, including successful implementation of evidence-informed policy and organisational change management strategies
- 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
- Develops other senior academic and clinical staff and brokers opportunities for others to develop their careers in clinical research
- Provides expertise and leadership in clinical research based on widely recognised national and international eminence

Development of the clinical academic research role descriptors

The pathway outlined focuses on the research⁴ activities of a clinical academic role and is specific to nurses wishing to pursue a career integrating nursing research and clinical practice. It does not encompass those clinical academic nurses working as clinical research nurses supporting research in environments such as clinical trials units –guidance on these roles is available elsewhere. Whilst the focus of the pathway outlined below is on the development of the research dimension of a clinical academic career, the framework approach outlined could also underpin delineation and development of education-focused activities as part of a clinical academic role. It could also be used to stimulate development of clinical academic role descriptors for allied health professionals.

The research and clinical components of clinical academic roles are described separately, but in reality we expect and hope that these will normally be integrated and used flexibly and interchangeably to inform high quality and efficient clinical practice and research processes.

We have used action-orientated descriptors, focused on actions expected in the workplace, rather than descriptors associated with an education model focusing on knowledge, skills and understanding.

⁴ Clinical activities are currently being developed and will be available shortly

An incremental approach has been taken to the activities outlined, with each level adding to the activities presented in previous levels, to reduce repetition and reflect the cumulative development and progression that would be expected at each level.

The clinical academic pathway activities have been developed by a working group and reviewed by members of the clinical academic Steering Group from the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton and its current partner health care organisations⁵ in the clinical academic career pathway. A small group of external experts were also consulted in the development and validation process.

Opportunities to develop clinical academic (research-focused) roles within the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton currently include an MRes in Clinical Research, as well as applications for NIHR funded Clinical Academic Training Awards for Nurses, Midwives and Allied Health Professionals.

⁵ Posts funded by South Central Strategic Health Authority, and operating in partnership with Southampton University NHS Hospitals Trust, Solent Healthcare, Basingstoke and North Hants NHS Foundation Trust

Working Group

Sue Latter, Professor of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton

Alison Richardson, Clinical Chair in Cancer Nursing and End of Life Care, Southampton University Hospitals NHS Trust and the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton

Mandy Fader, Professor of Continence Technology, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton

Clinical Academic Steering Group members who reviewed and / or contributed to the development of clinical academic pathway research activities:

Sue Duke, Consultant Practitioner in Cancer and Palliative Care Education/Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton

Jacqui Prieto, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Infection Prevention, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton

Suzanne Rankin, Deputy Chief Nurse, South Central Strategic Health Authority

Rosemary Chable, Associate Director of Nursing - Education, Professional Practice and Standards, Southampton University Hospitals NHS Trust

Lesley Atherton, Professional Practice and Quality Assurance Lead, Basingstoke and North Hampshire NHS Foundation Trust

Fleur Kitsell, Head of Innovation and Development, Workforce & Education, Clinical Standards & Workforce, South Central SHA

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