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Editorial: Critical uncertainty

The real crisis in higher education

Conversations with professors: an exploration of career success

Conclusion chapters in doctoral theses: some international findings

Notes from North America: Linda, VA AG 2013 and Knitting needles
Words

Books: The many shades of student engagement
The richness of opportunity and responsibility

VOLUME 46  NUMBER 3
SUMMER 2014
The international journal of policy and practice in post school education

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25 Milton Road, London W3 6QA
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Conversations with professors: an exploration of academic career success

Maree Gladwin, Gael McDonald and Jade McKay

What factors contribute most to career success in academia? Using qualitative methods, the study sought information from eighteen full and chaired professors in Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. Reflecting on factors that contributed to academic success, participants identified: an ‘inherent’ attraction to academic work; ability to manage time; passion for research; ability to meet the challenges of writing; and the ability to form and maintain professional relationships and networks. Success factors spanned differences in gender, age, academic discipline, and national higher education system. Given recent changes in higher education, the study concludes that universities may need to review their policies and practices in order to provide an environment that will help them attract and retain outstanding academics in the future.

Keywords: academic careers; academic success; career pathways; higher education; professors

Introduction
Understanding how academics are able to succeed in the world of academia is becoming ever more important as a result of well-documented changes in the academic environment across many countries in recent decades (Cummings and Finkelstein, 2012; Research Institute for Higher Education, 2008; Locke and Bennion, 2010; Boulton and Lucas, 2008; OECD, 2008). These changes are placing increasing pressure on higher education institutions and academic staff who are required to adapt to the many new and varied demands placed upon them, which include achieving research output, teaching excellence, integration of new digital technologies and entrepreneurial effort to name a few (Anderson, Richard and Saha, 2002; OECD, 2008; Cummings and Finkelstein, 2012; Locke and Teichler, 2007). Being a successful academic has required – and still does require – a 24/7 commitment to the academic career, yet only a minority of academics ever achieve the highest rank and recognition of ‘professor’ or an appointment to a chair position. (In 2011, chaired professors made up approximately 10 per cent of academic staff in the UK, Australia and New Zealand and around 26 per cent of full professors in the US.) In today’s increasingly international and competitive higher education environment, the path to academic success is strewn with ever more obstacles and challenges that aspiring academics must be able to negotiate. What can higher education institutions and academic staff learn from successful members of the professoriate about what it takes to survive and achieve in academia?

Using a subjectivist, qualitative approach we sought information from professors in order to shed light on the question: what factors contributed most to the success of this group of high achieving academics and internationally recognised researchers? In exploring answers to this question, we asked: how had the professors come to enter the academic profession? What attracted them to an academic role initially and motivated them to pursue a career in academia? What aspects of their work did they see as having the most impact on their success and how had they responded to the challenges and opportunities that arose in the course of their career? From the data obtained, we assessed the study’s contribution to existing research on academic careers and considered the implications for universities wishing to attract and retain outstanding academics in the future.

Prior Literature
Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006), in seeking to identify previous research on academic careers, found that there is ‘relatively little of a cross-disciplinary nature about and/or aimed at academics’ (p289). This is especially so for studies beyond the North American higher education environment. Providing an overview of research into vocational outcomes, Lindholm (2004) maintained that little theory or research ‘has focused specifically on the vocational development of college and university professors’ (p603). More recently, van Balen et al (2012) substantiated this view, concluding that the focus has largely been on the early academic career stages rather than ‘on the development of the entire career’ (p314). Despite some recent exceptions (Jungbauer-Gans and Gross, 2013; Wellman and Spreitzer, 2011; Lindholm, 2004) there have been few studies that have investigated the lifespan of academic careers.
Rather than focus on academic careers in terms of development, progression and success, studies in the last decade have tended to concentrate on specific aspects of academic life. These have focused on issues such as gender inequality and challenges for women academics (August and Waltman, 2004; Balslev, 2003; Fox, 2004; National Research Council, 2010; O’Connor, Wiley et al., 2012; Rhon; 2011); balancing work and family demands (Armenta, 2004; Connelly and Godsee, 2011; Fox et al., 2011; Halpern, 2008; Wolfinger et al., 2008); career stages (Bonetta, 2010; Weimer, 2010); the growing discontent of academics (van Balen and van den Besselaar, 2007; Lowenstein et al., 2007; Wilson, 2012); and on changes to the role of academics and to the university environment more broadly (Strike, 2005; Anderson et al., 2002; Barnett and Napoli, 2008; Harley, et al., 2004; Locke and Bennion, 2010; OECD, 2008; Pienaar and Bester, 2009).

A number of studies have used different perspectives within the field of career theory and other perspectives to investigate academic careers. Drawing from concepts of the vocational and developmental psychology strands of career theory, Baldwin and Blackburn (1981) described the academic career as an evolutionary process that moves through five transitional stages from assistant professor through to full professor. They found that the academic career development was a ‘complex process...stimulated and qualified by the interactive effects of internal and external forces’ (p602). Some characteristics of career stages were found to vary across each stage while others were common to several stages and remained remarkably constant over time. For example, academics in all five stages ‘rated pressure from workload as the greatest source of stress in their vocation’ (p604). In contrast, 94 per cent of full professors, far more than in most other career stages, said that they understood their institution’s mode of operation.

Academics in the study also identified critical events as having exerted a significant influence, mostly positive, on their career. Professors, in particular, saw opportunities to expand their professional capabilities, through sabbaticals, research projects and independent study grants, as significant events that were beneficial to their careers. Unlike other career research of the 1970s and 1980s, Baldwin and Blackburn (1981:608) relied on subjective, ‘self-reported’ data from which they generalized in order to ‘summarize salient attributes and experiences’ of the academics in their study. This methodology was in contrast to the dominance of positivist methods in vocational psychology, such as in Holland (1973) which used various forms of cognitive and aptitude tests to match individual personality types and intrinsic traits against different occupational and organizational environments.

A study of pathways to the professoriate by Lindholm (2004) examined the ways in which academic careers are shaped by both individual and environmental factors. She asked: What attracts academics to faculty work? When is the decision made to pursue an academic career? What experiences and people have the most impact on the decision to become a professor? For Lindholm (2004), these are important questions given the looming staff shortages in the academic workforce internationally and the need for universities to attract talented academics. Drawing on Finkelman (1984) and Astin’s (1984) needs-based socio-psychological model of career choice, Lindholm (2004) identified developmental and career specific influences responsible for shaping academic careers. In terms of developmental factors, many participants were found to have an ‘inherent attraction’ (p611) to academic work and to ‘the allure of university work environments’ (p612). They were drawn to it out of a need for autonomy, independence and individual expression. Faculty work also appealed to them as it fostered intellectual curiosity, opportunity and encouragement. About two-thirds of the participants had aspired to an academic career but a third were found to have been ‘accidental academics’ who had not followed a traditional, linear career pathway.

In relation to career specific influences, Lindholm (2004) found that the career aspirations were shaped by ‘childhood experiences, undergraduate and graduate school training, and personal perceptions of competence’ (p614). These factors were mediated, in turn, by ‘generational differences...attributable to the characteristics of the socio-historical times during which professors grew up and...began their academic careers’ (p621). For example, those professors who commenced their careers in the 1960s saw their future as ‘full of possibilities’ (p622) whereas others entering the more competitive academic labour market of recent times, accepted job offers because they were the only offers they thought they would receive. Overall, Lindholm (2004:630) concluded that ‘from the standpoint of the individual, we need to consider the effects of graduate school training, socialization, and labor market conditions in shaping academic career aspirations’.

In the context of higher education in the Netherlands, van Balen et al. (2012:314) investigated determinants of academic success, including differences in social background (cultural capital), in networks and mentoring (social capital), in contextual factors (such as the labour
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market) and in academic performance (intellectual capital) (p314). Unlike many other studies, their approach to career development took into account ‘the whole career.’ By comparing twenty-one male and female academics who had continued an academic career with an equivalent cohort who had left academia, van Balen et al (2012) identified a number of factors that influence retention. With regard to individual factors and cultural capital, they concluded that: family background and the education level of parents is no longer a determining factor in the success of academics; successful academics demonstrate better school performances and grades during secondary education; and that successful academics have the support of partners. In relation to social and institutional capital, they found that: all interviewees identified having a mentor/coach/supervisor as fundamental to their success; networking was essential to success; and, finally, that success in an academic career also depended on the ‘career system’ and ‘career policies’ that exist within universities.

The study also considered the role of academic performance (the number of publications and citations) in determining whether people left or stayed in academia. Here, their findings conclusively revealed that ‘there is no systematic relationship between the career success and the commonly used indicators of scholarly performance’ (van Balen et al 2012:328). While the study analysed individual, organisational and contextual factors separately, van Balen et al (2012) found that academic careers are in reality ‘stimulated...or inhibited...by an accumulation of advantages and disadvantages’ (p331).

More recently, Jungbauer-Gans and Gross (2013) investigated factors which determine the chances of being appointed to a chair in Germany. Drawing mainly on discrimination, social and human capital theory, they derived a number of hypotheses about the determinants of success in the academic labour market.

Jungbauer-Gans and Gross (2013) found that there were no universal criteria that accounted for success apart from being awarded habilitation at a younger age. (In the German higher education system academics who have completed a PhD must then complete a period of untenured habilitation (sometimes called ‘a second PhD’) before being able to progress to a tenured professorship. There are three levels of professorship: first class, second-class and exceptional class. In order to obtain a professorship, academics must apply for a position in another university and undergo a competitive process.) While productivity and human capital were common factors, their impact differed between disciplines. There was also considerable variation in the impact of ‘non-meritocratic aspects’; gender, social origin, and social and institutional capital. In the disciplines of mathematics and law, social origin and ‘having a well esteemed mentor’ (p85) were found to be influential whereas productivity, as measured by the number of publications, was found to have had less impact on success. In law, the chance of being promoted was more influenced by ‘the proportion of time spent on doing research’ (p85). These findings were in contrast to those for sociology where neither social origin nor having a well esteemed mentor had a statistically significant impact. Rather, success in sociology was found to be influenced by gender (with women having a better chance of success than men) but even more so, by productivity. Despite wide coverage in the literature, social capital was found to exert a surprisingly weak influence in sociology and law, where ‘respondents having a large share of household tasks’ were only ‘slightly disadvantaged’ in terms of success (85). Similarly unexpected was the finding that institutional capital had no significant effect on the career futures of academics applying for a professorship.

**Research Method**

Informed by prior research, the purpose of the study was to gather qualitative information from professors about their experience of becoming successful academics and achieving the rank of professor. The study asked participants to reflect upon the personal qualities and professional strategies that they considered the most important for their success and to identify the factors they regarded as the most important to the success of aspiring academics today.

The qualitative method used reflects more recent approaches in career theory that focus on subjectivist and constructivist rather than subjectivist approaches to understanding how people develop and make sense of their careers. For example, in their study of academic careers, Dany, Louvel and Valette (2011), like Arthur, Inks and Pringle (1999), adopted a qualitative approach in the belief ‘that recounting their own experiences leads individuals to provide rich and nuanced insights regarding how they perceive their own role, that of their working contexts, and the interactions between the two’ (p977).

As a method for researching individual careers, a qualitative approach privileges individual choices and sense-making. The use of a flexible questionnaire and largely face-to-face conversations in this study were effective in prompting narratives or ‘stories’ from the professors that ‘elucidated the subjective level and the relationship between individual action and the wider social and cultural contexts’ (Cohen and Malon, 2001:49). It allowed the professors to reflect upon and express their
experiences in terms of their individual career ‘logic’ and to draw connections and conclusions based on long-term life and work experiences in academia. Given the relative paucity of prior research into academic careers, together with the small number of participants, the qualitative method produced a richness of contextualised data covering many issues, not all of which could be discussed in this paper.

Information was collected from eighteen ‘full’ or chaired professors (56 per cent women) who are highly recognized in their field. A third of participants were in science or related disciplines, while others ranged across social science and humanities fields. The selection process was based on biographies and information relating to research track records that was obtained through university websites, conference programs and the authors’ experiences of working in different higher education settings over many years. Sixteen professors were employed in a university at the time of interview while two remained closely connected through their honorary professorial positions. On average, the professors had worked in 3-4 universities over the course of their career, but three (two women and one man) had worked for only one. Many of the participants had worked in research-intensive universities in Australia, New Zealand, UK, Canada and the United States at some point in their career, though not necessarily in the early stages. Although the majority of participants (more women than men) had not worked for more than six months in a university outside Australia, all the professors in the study had spent some time overseas as visiting or guest professors, often working with leading researchers in their field. One or two in-depth conversations of one to two and half hours took place with each participant between 2011 and 2012; most of these were face-to-face but two were conducted by telephone.

Each participant was sent a copy of a questionnaire prior to being interviewed and invited to select three sets of questions or subjects that they saw as most relevant to their success. Some participants said that all the subjects were important. Others selected three or more for discussion. All the participants, however, were asked initial questions relating to their pathway into an academic career. The questionnaire was not used as a survey instrument for gathering objective data; rather, it served as a tool for defining the parameters of the conversations and stimulating discussion about the subjects identified. Regardless of the number of subjects selected for discussion, the conversations touched on many of the subjects represented in the questionnaire.

The conversations with participants were recorded and later transcribed, identify common themes and from this, to draw out factors most frequently described by the participants as having contributed to success in their academic career.

Findings and Discussion
An analysis of the qualitative data revealed a number of factors that the participants regarded as important to their career choice, and which all or most believed had contributed to their ability to progress to professorial and senior leadership positions in universities. Many viewpoints and experiences were common to all participants irrespective of age, gender, social background or geographic location, hence, demographic details are not provided unless they relate to hypotheses or findings in the literature or suggest new directions for further research.

Pathways into an academic career
All the professors who participated were asked about their pathway into academia and their motivations for working in universities. These conversations were rich in information about their route into a university career, how they responded to academic work, and how they felt about working in a university environment.

A majority of the professors did not begin their working life as an academic but spent their initial working years in other roles, for example, in the public service, in industry or, in a few cases, raising children. One female professor volunteered that becoming an academic was her ‘third career’. A ‘non-traditional’ pathway into academia was particularly true for the group of professors interviewed and applied equally to men and women in both social sciences and humanities disciplines. Similar to findings by Clarke (1987), the professors in science disciplines (28 per cent of participants) took a more direct route into academia. All the male professors in science fields and one of the two women had moved directly to an academic position immediately after completing a doctoral qualification but this was not always as a result of career planning.

I had no intention to become an academic as an undergraduate or even after completing my PhD. I think the principal reason I became an academic was because of role models. I had two mentors who both inspired me to continue on with an academic career.

Like this professor, many who went back to do postgraduate study later in life said that they were encouraged to stay on afterwards by their
professors or supervisors. One female professor became a school teacher after finishing her undergraduate degree. She had been out of the workforce for a few years raising children when she decided to go back to university to do a post-graduate degree. Towards the end of the degree, one of the academic staff said to her: ‘Are you interested in doing some tutoring? Have you thought about doing some research after your degree?’ As a result of becoming interested in research she moved on to pursue a successful academic career. As reported in Lindholm’s (2004) study of pathways into the professoriate, supervisors and other academic staff were important influences on the career choices and direction of many of the professors in the study.

A few of the participants found their way into a successful academic career through university teaching. One woman professor had moved with her husband when he took up a corporate job overseas. As she was unable to get a job in her own professional field, she decided to try the university in their new city. She immediately got a job teaching and loved it. She decided: ‘I really like this. I should go and be a proper academic – do my PhD and all the rest of it’.

The move into academia was not always direct for men either. For example, one of the professors in the social sciences took time to discover what he wanted to do: ‘I didn’t find out until I was in my thirties what the [higher education] industry was like’. Others worked out their career path as they went along.

For many, ‘falling into’ an academic job was made possible, in part, by the employment opportunities that were available in universities in the early stages of their career. The role played by fluctuations in the academic labour market on career opportunities in the Netherlands was considered in studies by van Balen et al (2012) and Lindholm (2004). They suggested that the careers of professors who entered academia in periods when universities were expanding, benefitted from a more open labour market than those entering when universities were experiencing financial cutbacks. Many of the professors had similarly taken advantage of the opportunities available in the more open academic labour markets of the 1970s and early 80s. For example, one professor who began her career in the mid-1970s, had access to opportunities that would be unimaginable today:

I taught for a year or two in school and decided that I preferred teaching at universities and ... in those days you could go off and ask the university to employ you. So I went ... to x university and said ‘You need me’ and started at level A [the lowest level].

Interestingly, none of the professors interviewed said that they had grown up with the aspiration to become an academic or a professor. It was on returning to university to do postgraduate study that some discovered a possible future as an academic through exposure, and as a result of the encouragement and opportunities being made available by their supervisors and other academics. Like one third of participants in Lindholm’s (2004) study described as ‘accidental academics’, many participants in this study said that their entry into an academic career had ‘just happened’ or that they had ‘fallen into it accidentally’ having tried other less satisfying work options beforehand or because of particular circumstances, such as returning to study after having children, after a divorce or after accompanying a partner overseas. A lack of intentionality in early career choice seems to be common to the majority of professors interviewed.

The level of parental education has traditionally been found to play an influential role in shaping the educational expectations of children (Wells et al, 2011) though this influence, as van Balen et al (2012) found, has been diminishing over recent decades with increased access to higher education (Goyette, 2008). A large proportion of the professors in this study had begun their university careers 30 or more years ago, nevertheless more than half were the first member of their family to obtain a university degree or to pursue an academic career. The resultant lack of what van Balen et al (2012) referred to as ‘cultural capital’ had been felt keenly by many.

My family didn’t want me to go to university at all. They weren’t keen on the idea and thought that I would ‘go off the rails’, and so the only way to keep me on the rails was for me to go to work.

As with participants in other studies of academic career development (Jungbauer-Gans and Goss, 2013; van Balen et al, 2012), many of the professors in the study were lacking in cultural capital and hence, this does not appear to have been a determining factor in their career choice or their pathway into academia.

The inherent attraction of academic work

Lindholm’s (2004) study of factors that influence the career choices of academics reported that

academics spoke passionately about their work, the inherent ‘fit’ between themselves and their jobs and ... and the opportunities that academic work offers for fulfilling their individual needs and ambitions (p611)
These findings are reflected in the comments made by participants about their work needs, motivations and interests as academics.

Whether they followed a traditional pathway or were ‘accidental academics’ (Lindholm, 2004), once they had begun their academic careers, the participants, almost without exception, felt they had found their niche. It is clear that working in an academic role and in a university environment satisfied many of their needs and interests and hence they had remained in universities for the rest of their careers. As one of the ‘first-in-family’ professors put it:

Having been let loose in a university, I just loved it ... I loved the environment. I loved being able to be much more dedicated to the role of learning ... what attracted me to an academic career... was ... being surrounded by books and learning with endless opportunities.

All the professors in the study identified aspects of their work that had attracted them and that they had found fulfilling. Along with a love of learning and ‘intellectual enquiry’, they talked about the excitement of ‘generating new knowledge’, the ‘fascination’ of doing research, their love of teaching and the ‘joy of being able to do work that [they are] passionate about’ and that satisfies the imagination and curiosity. Others were motivated by ‘problem-solving in and of itself’ and doing research that is ‘relevant’, as well as the opportunity to ‘leave a footprint’ and ‘to make a contribution to society’. All of these needs could be satisfied by working in an academic context.

For all the professors, the nature of academic work was profoundly satisfying and that it was this ‘fit’ that had motivated them in their careers. Equally influential was their fit with the working conditions in universities.

Almost without exception, the participants emphasised the flexibility, freedom, independence and ‘the ability to control one’s own life’ that working in academia provided. Independence and autonomy played a key role for many. These aspects were emphasised by one of the professors who had left another occupation to work in a university setting.

I couldn’t possibly work in an office where you had to account for every minute of your time. I was looking for something that required a lot more independence, and the ability to control your own work life.

It was apparent from our conversations with professors that they saw themselves as perfectly suited for academic work and had achieved satisfaction from it. This assessment of their aptitude for academic work was undoubtedly influenced by their feeling of personal competence and the experience of success along the way, as evidenced by their attainment of a professorship, appointment to senior leadership positions and the recognition they had earned for their contribution to their discipline and to society.

Despite feeling they were a perfect fit for their roles, career success for most of the professors had not come easily. In the interviews, all described the many challenges and difficulties that they had been presented with. Many also recognised that their success in meeting the challenges had been achieved at some personal cost to themselves and to their families.

The ability to manage time
The challenge of finding enough time to do everything and do it well was a major theme in the interviews. For many, finding time was identified as one of the most testing and important challenges they had faced in their personal and professional lives. This was particularly the case for the teaching and research professors in the study.

Without exception, all the professors interviewed chose to discuss the issue of finding and managing their time: why it was so important, the approaches they had taken to resolving it, and the consequences for their personal lives. Indeed, the ability to manage time was seen as one of the most essential attributes for anyone wishing to pursue a successful academic career.

Difficulties in finding time arose from the need to demands of teaching and administration with the time to them to undertake quality research. With environments in which they had worked, productivity in terms of high quality teaching, were essential to their position. Though research was most universities way as teaching was a ‘structured’ time and find time for it.

The teaching activity... I see people who let the period as well. They are people let the structured...
Many professions demand more hours than are available in a normal working week, but in academia it is also the nature of the work itself, the need to have a great diversity of skills and the competing tasks, along with both structured and unstructured working conditions, that makes time management such an issue. Effective strategies for making time for research were therefore seen to be critical for academic success.

Time management decisions often involved making choices between competing responsibilities. One professor with a high teaching load in his early career said: ‘I knew I could be an outstanding teacher but I could not be an outstanding teacher and an outstanding researcher simultaneously’. Another said:

It is very important to allocate your time and to be selfish about it if you want a career. If you want to get on in the profession you really have to be … selfish and give yourself time to do the research.

Many practical strategies were trialled by participants and developed over time. These included being single-minded about quarantining specific days of the week or blocking out part of days to do research work and not checking email during the day. A number of participants described the way they had learnt to re-focus quickly from teaching to research tasks, make use of small amounts of time during the day to do more routine research tasks, or avoid labouring unnecessarily over tasks such as teaching preparation or writing. Some became very efficient at using technologies such as Google calendar and processes for managing documentation.

In order to achieve any degree of continuity in their creative work, several professors described how they had to think about their research all the time – when taking a shower, going for a run, or at the hairdresser or gym – and they planned daily what they were going to further their research.

However, time constraints were not always an impediment to success. Some professors said that, early in their career, they felt pressured by lack of time to make the strategic decision to sacrifice quantity for quality in research output – a decision that happily served to enhance their reputation and contributed to, rather than detract from, their academic profile.

Regardless of the time management strategies developed, and despite the degree of workplace flexibility that most universities provided, finding time for research came at some cost to personal and family lives. The difficulty of raising a family and pursuing an academic career, especially for women and in the early career stages, has been documented (Armenti, 2004; Connelly and Godsee, 2011; Fox, Fonseca and Bao, 2011; Halpern, 2008; Wolfinger, Mason and Goulden, 2008). This issue was highlighted by one woman professor:

The only challenge I’ve had to deal with all the way through has just been time, and that has been much more the act of juggling a family and … career.

As other research has shown, the problem of time management and work/life balance for women with children is especially acute and often remains so even as their children grew older and the women move into more senior positions in an organisation. Academic work is no exception as one woman found: ‘I wouldn’t say I had work-life balance for the first ten years and I think it becomes harder to get that as you get higher up the system.’ The pressure was especially difficult for those who lacked strong support in the home:

... it was a real challenge to have a child, to be the primary carer and to be the person who kept the household together while continuing to do research. And ... if I had had one more child, I cannot see how I could have done it.

The study found that whatever their personal circumstances, achieving a balance between lifestyle, family, working, teaching and research was, as one professor explained, ‘probably one of the most difficult issues for an academic’.

Not all of the participants felt that academic and family life were incompatible for instance a male professor in New Zealand said:

I found academia quite kind when it comes to incorporating family. Academia is tolerant of time spent at the office and at home, so staying at home for family reasons isn’t hard to do. It’s quite flexible.

A similar but modified view was expressed by a female professor in the United States who had been a single parent in her first few years as an academic. She found that unlike other occupations, such as consulting, ‘academia can be a very good profession for women’. There was more ‘flexibility in your hours’ and although ‘you have to teach, you can usually find a way to schedule things around your teaching’. Research time, however, seemed to be more difficult to accommodate:

I would never have gotten research done if I did it 9 to 5 ... you have
to do research, you simply have to prioritize that time, you have to somehow make sure that time comes first.

Despite the degree of flexibility available to academics working in the higher education systems represented in the study, all the professors felt that the ability to manage time had been crucial to their success. This finding is no doubt influenced to some extent by the proportion of professors who had worked for the majority of their career in the Australian education system. Comparing the working conditions of Australian academics with those in twenty-five other countries, Coates et al. (2009) found that academics in Australia work among the longest hours per week, especially in the highest ranks and have one of the lowest levels of satisfaction with institutional management and support. This data highlights the challenges facing academic staff and their families, and the continuing importance of managing time to academic success.

Recognised the critical role played by research
Wood’s (1990) finding that “for the majority of academics, the research function is clearly the main attraction of the academic position” (p93) is confirmed by the perceptions of the professors in this study. Indeed, as suggested by Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006), research played a major part in professors feeling they were a good fit for their job. Without exception, research was seen as playing a critical role in their success and even those who had moved into executive or other senior positions chose to continue doing research.

Most of the professors were pre-disposed to the research aspects of academic work by an inherent spirit of inquiry, curiosity and passion to explore new areas of knowledge, and by a desire to engage creatively in intellectual pursuits.

I’ve been interested in research because it keeps you vital, it keeps you connected with something that’s interesting and fun and links you in with a whole population of people who are passionate about what they do.

Extrinsic factors, such as personal ambition, monetary rewards or institutional pressure did not seem to play as significant a role in motivating professors as factors such as a desire to be heard or to make a meaningful contribution to society. One professor said:

Making a contribution is a good feeling. Before I die I want to have made some contribution that is going to change ... people’s lives for the better. That is a key driver for me rather than say ‘Oh how much money can be made?’

Another commented:

I had no real interest in career progression for its own sake; I became a professor in order to gain a voice and some recognition for what I was saying.

Such views concur with findings by McInnis (2001) and with the views of academics surveyed by Bellamy et al. (2003), the majority of whom were found to be ‘motivated by intrinsic interests rather than by material rewards – or extrinsic interests – in the work they do’ (Bellamy et al., 2003:16).

Although all the participants were intrinsically motivated, they nevertheless saw the research process as demanding and many talked about the challenges in developing their research track record and profile. Even the idea of doing research was a hurdle for some:

I was ... very afraid of research. ... I felt I could be a good teacher but I heard people say that you had to do some kind of research that had never been done before and that is an incredibly intimidating statement.

Others described the challenges of writing publications and grant applicants, dealing with feedback and rejection, and the competitiveness and politics of research, and talked about the skills and strategies they had developed over time to deal with these aspects of research.

Engaged with the challenges of writing
The writing of academic papers and grant applications had always been difficult for a small number of the participants, as revealed by one professor who calculated that, out of the 150 scientific papers he had submitted to journals, ‘only one was ever accepted on the first go’. Accepting that writing was not one of his strengths, he developed the strategy of ‘continuous writing and engagement with a project’ that involved drafting and re-drafting. This strategy, driven by his determination and persistence, contributed to his eventual success.

Even though writing came more naturally to a majority of the professors, it was not seen as an inherent attribute. This was highlighted by one professor: ‘I wasn’t born able to write journal articles. I’ve had to learn it, and practise. Persistence is more important than anything.’
The ability to deal with disappointment when their writing was criticised or rejected by reviewers and journal editors featured strongly in all the comments made by the professors. Indeed, the ability to manage disappointment seemed to be one of the defining attributes of this group of successful academics. This applied equally to the professors for whom writing came more easily as to those who found it a struggle. Everyone had consciously evolved for themselves a way of dealing with the criticism and rejection they received from reviewers, editors, publishers, grant bodies and others, that protected their self-esteem and made strategic use of the feedback. Some were pragmatic, reasoning: ‘Academics need to learn that it’s just part of the process.’

A number of the professors rationalised critical feedback as being beneficial and necessary. One said: ‘I get major resubmits but the comments are good and you end up with a much better piece’. For others, dealing with negative feedback was challenging:

You get really ... upset and ... you say they were idiots and they didn’t understand you and then you have to think if they didn’t understand me that’s because I didn’t tell them the right things.

A collegial approach to writing proved to be productive and enjoyable for many of the professors. This could involve working with a writing partner, a muse or writing with teams. In some instances, this approach continued across their whole career. Collaboration was also a successful strategy for generating research ideas, drawing on complementary skills and stimulating interest in research long after the foundations of a research career had been laid.

As with publications, the need to manage failure and rejection arose in relation to applications for research grants. In all the countries represented in the study, competition for sources of funding, such as those awarded by government agencies, was intense, with a high proportion of applications being rejected. Faced with the demands of writing grant applications and winning research funds, participants were, in general, realistic in assessing their chances of being successful, as one person reported: ‘You have to be pretty harsh with identifying when you are wasting your time’. In response to the challenges associated with raising research funds, including the uncertainty and apparent unfairness associated with ‘the politics of the whole process’, most of the professors were stoic and demonstrated healthy resilience, saying ‘I didn’t let it get me down’. They found that the best way to deal with rejection was to keep ‘taking risks’ and to ‘roll with the punches’.

The participants managed their disappointment by being realistic in their expectations and maintaining a positive outlook. It appeared that they were also able to move on from disappointment and refocus their attention on what motivated them and mattered to them. As one professor said: ‘What you do with research ... is, in my mind, the really important thing.’

**Actively building relationships and networks**

The development of networks and professional relationships within and outside of academia were regarded by the professors as playing a major role in all stages of a successful academic career.

If you are shy or introverted, do some social skills training and get over it because if you want to be successful as an academic or in research and ... if you want to become a leader, you have to network with people.

The social aspects of an academic role were important to participants for many reasons, including making contact with other academics, raising your profile with a discipline and finding research collaborators.

In an area not given much attention in the literature, many of the interviewees were aware of the importance of maintaining a good reputation in your field to succeeding in an academic career. This included being fair and ethical in the way you acknowledge authorial contribution, reference the ideas of others, share intellectual property, deal with data, and respect the journal review process. This concern to behave ethically in pursuing research seemed to arise, on the one hand, from a respect for their discipline and for protecting the reputation of academia more generally. On the other hand, personal integrity, the building of trust with collaborators, and qualities such as honesty, trustworthiness, reliability and having a good work ethic, were seen to be important for collegial reasons and for maintaining the social networks upon which the research process and a successful academic career were seen to depend. As one professor acknowledged:

We very rarely work in isolation. All kinds of interactions arise ... and unless you behave decently in those interactions, then you are not going to be able to work very well.

New and stimulating ideas as well as new collaborations had often arisen from conversations at conferences or from other kinds of informal interactions. The benefits of these less formal interactions were highlighted by many of the participants who said, ‘To me the most
interesting ideas have always been generated through conversations,' while another commented, 'That's how research happens: it happens by accident. It's about who you meet.'

Many highlighted the importance of these social aspects of the academic role. These social or 'relational' aspects served the needs and interests of many of the professors who said that they had enjoyed the friendships and close collaborations developed in the course of their work.

The relational basis of research ... that resonates with me because in every respect, coming up with an idea, splitting the division of labour, dealing with harsh reviews ... all of that is just made better.

Networks and professional friendships had played an especially important role in the earlier career stages of another professor who recalled:

Networking for getting research, for collaborating in writing, for getting published have been absolutely critical. At first, I networked because I was part-time and at home with children, and working, and a bit lonely, and that was nice way to connect with people. It has just been so beneficial.

A few of the professors who said they were more 'introverted' by nature found that building networks came less naturally to them and was a less appealing part of their role. Nevertheless, they recognised the importance of networks to achieving their goals.

*Stimulated by the influence of role models and mentors*

A number of professors said they had benefitted from having a formal or 'traditional' mentor during their career. Nevertheless, for almost half of the participants, their professional relationships with supervisors or collaborations with senior colleagues had provided them with highly influential role models or had incorporated some kind of informal mentoring or advisory function that had made an important contribution to their success. These findings reflect those reported by van Balen et al. (2012) and by Jungbauer-Gans and Gross (2013) who found that the 'social capital' obtained by having a mentor, coach or supervisor, and especially one who is highly regarded, can be critical to success.

As discussed above, a number of the professors mentioned having received some form of mentoring, guidance or encouragement from their supervisor or senior colleagues early in their career. One professor, for instance, described forming a friendship at the start of her career with an eminent visiting professor. He had subsequently invited her to join a research project at his university overseas and introduced her to other members of his research team and network. Another professor described her atypical mentoring experience in the following way.

He was ... encouraging but in a very noncommittal ... way. I don't think he would ... see himself as a mentor. He was a very hard taskmaster, he wasn't someone who spent a lot of time with me, but he ... had more impact than he would have ever understood.

Of those professors who did mention mentors, several said that they had had a number of different ones over the course of their career, some very prestigious, who had provided encouragement or who had assisted them in specific ways, for example, with a publishing strategy or with their application for promotion to professor.

For certain professors, a mentoring-type relationship with a senior academic early in their career had grown over time to become a more equal, peer relationship with the senior colleague becoming a close collaborator or co-writer. Several of these relationships were sustained over long periods of time and were highly productive, as one male professor described:

I have worked with one of my mentors from my under graduate years for 25 years ... He was one of the major collaborators in my life ... and ... he facilitated ... a lot of the networks and ... contacts for me.

Women professors were more likely than men to talk about benefiting from some kind of mentoring in their career. For the few men like the professor above who did discuss the experience of being mentored, these relationships seemed to have been more intense and sustained and to have had an important influence on their career development and success. Of the minority of participants who said they had not been mentored, several said they regretted it and felt that more needs to be done by universities and by senior academics to provide this kind of support.

*Exhibited self-determination and adaptability*

The conversations with the professors ranged across many subjects relating to their academic work and career but rarely did participants attribute their frustrations or disappointments to the institutions in which they worked or focus for any length of time on the limitations of
working in a university environment or in academia more generally. When faced with obstacles, the participants said they had dealt with these by developing their own strategies or drawing on the help of their networks or mentors. Self-reliance and a preparedness to take responsibility for their needs, is clearly reflected, for example, in the philosophy of one professor who said:

I always tell people never to expect anything from the university ... if you are expecting the university to help you in a lot of these issues, getting a grant, seeding your research, providing for you to go to an overseas conference, you will actually become more quickly disillusioned and frustrated. So I have always put in my mind 'expect nothing from the university and earn it yourself'.

Many professors saw their career success as the result of their own hard work and the choices they had made while a few also attributed their success to chance or luck.

I've often thought what got me to this stage was just a strong work ethic. I don't think I ever set out to become a professor, I never had that as a target that I was heading for. I just did what I did reasonably well, I think, and worked hard.

While it was common for the professors to emphasise the importance of self-responsibility and self-reliance to career success, many also recognised the importance of coming to terms with the system itself; of staying positive and being adaptable in the face of change, of remaining realistic about the limitations and needs of the 'system' and knowing how to accommodate these in order to serve your own needs and interests.

... the university environment is continuously changing. You either accept you want to change with the environment, or you refuse ... there are many opportunities, and being positive, you can always identify something that is aligned with your interests but you are a part of the system and you have to benefit the system.

**Conclusion and implications**

An analysis of the qualitative data obtained from conversations with a diverse group of eighteen professors in the study reveals that a majority had taken an ‘accidental’, unintentional or otherwise non-traditional pathway into academia. For those whose careers spanned several decades, their pathways into academia and their career progression had been facilitated by ‘contextual factors’ (van Balen *et al*, 2012) such as the open academic labour markets of the time. In this study, the participants were also asked to reflect upon factors which, from their own experience, were important for developing a successful academic career. For all or most of the professors these factors included: an inherent attraction to academic work; the ability to manage time; a passion for research; an ability to meet the challenges of writing; an ethical approach to academic work; the access to academic networks; the ability to develop and maintain professional relationships with supervisors, mentors and collaborators; to be self-determining but adaptable in relation to the university system.

The factors identified in the conversations are consistent with findings of previous studies. As van Balen *et al* (2012) and Jungbauer-Gans and Gross (2013) found, ‘social’ and ‘cultural capital’ in the form of supportive personal and professional relationships, academic networks, role models, mentors, and collaborators, make an important contribution to academic success. Also important, as indicated in Lindholm’s study (2004), is the ‘fit’ between the expressed values, needs and interests of the professors and their academic roles and environment. Although a number of such factors have been identified in previous studies as contributing to academic career choice or success, these factors have varied, for example, by discipline (Jungbauer-Gans and Gross, 2013) or, in the case of attraction to academic work, have been variable and largely unsystematic (Lindholm, 2004).

While this study is limited in scope, it is unique in the diversity of its participants. Surprisingly, information provided by the professors suggests that their success was to a large extent founded in characteristics that span differences in gender, age, academic discipline, and the geographic location of higher education systems. All the professors were highly motivated and passionate about their academic work, and were prepared to pay a high personal cost in order to pursue their needs and interests. In doing so, they were largely ‘self-determining’ and took responsibility for their own development and career progression. While valuing their autonomy and independence, they were also highly conscious of the inter-dependent nature of academic work and the importance of being an ethical and trustworthy colleague and collaborator. All had developed a range of strategies for overcoming difficulties and achieving their goals, whether these were to compensate for their technical weaknesses, manage their time and work/life balance, or maintain and increase their research productivity. In surmounting obstacles in their environment, they revealed a high degree of persistence and resilience; dealing, for example, with
criticism, rejection and other setbacks by ‘reframing’ their priorities in line with their values.

Without exception, the professors felt that they were to some extent predisposed to the academic profession as a result of inherent qualities or traits, such as a love of learning, but many of the characteristics they revealed in conversation had emerged or been changed through interaction with the academic environment. Characteristics such as resilience, persistence, the ability to form relationships, to be self-motivating, and to manage the emotional self, imply a high level of emotional intelligence that, in turn, enhanced their capacity to learn from, adapt to and influence their academic environment. By contrast, neither a high level of cognitive intelligence nor, as van Balen et al. (2012) discovered, ‘academic performance’ appear to be, in themselves, reliable indicators of future academic career success.

What then are the implications of this study for understanding academic career success in today’s changing higher education environment? Academic careers, as Baldwin and Blackburn (1981) noted, involve a complex and dynamic ‘interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic factors’ (p602). This finding is confirmed by this study which suggests that success for academics may increasingly depend, as some recent approaches in ‘new career’ theory indicate (Savickas, 2012), on the extent to which academics are able to mediate changes in their environment by developing their capacity for flexibility, adaptability and resilience, and their ability to be self-reliant and strategic. The extent to which these capacities are inherent or learnt, how they function across a larger academic population, and whether they remain relevant in the academic environment of the future, will require further research with implications for ongoing developments in career theory.

The findings from this study also raise implications for higher education institutions. For the professors in the study, the qualities and skills needed to progress in their career were developed in often stressful circumstances, at different stages and in contexts that, while never easy, were undoubtedly more accommodating than the higher education environments of the future. For this reason, institutions wishing to attract and retain talented academic staff may need to protect those aspects of the academic role that best serve their values, needs and interests, at the same time as providing opportunities for academic staff to strengthen those characteristics which are most likely to enhance their career success. Such interventions, however, will require changes to higher education policy and practice and a preparedness to prioritise and invest in the professional development of academic staff; actions which, according to previous reports (Coates et al., 2009; Locke and Bennion, 2010; OECD, 2008) few higher education systems or individual institutions have, so far, felt the need to undertake.

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