



***The Pilgrim's Progress: early-career academic nurses'
journey of shaping, strengthening and sustaining a
career mindset***

Aileen Wyllie

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of:

Professor Tracy Levett-Jones
Associate Professor Michelle DiGiacomo
Professor Patricia Davidson

University of Technology Sydney
Faculty of Health

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Certificate of original authorship

I, Aileen Wyllie, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Health at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Statement: format of the thesis

The thesis is presented as a compilation of chapters and publications. Chapters 1, 3, 7 and 8 follow a traditional format. Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6 include published manuscripts, inserted as pdfs. Chapter 7 includes content for a future publication, and Chapter 8 focuses on the discussion and conclusions.

Format of chapters without publications:

Chapters 1, 3, 7 and 8 follow conventional format with introduction, aim, content and summary sections. They exist to support the four-phase longitudinal study.

Format of chapters with publications:

Chapter 2 contains the published systematic literature review, and Chapters 4, 5 and 6 contain publications which make up the four-phase longitudinal qualitative descriptive study. They have introduction and aim sections, describe the impact of the publications, their key findings, and present the publications in full.

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Statement of contributions

We, Tracy-Levett-Jones, Michelle DiGiacomo and Patricia Davidson, attest that we participated in all aspects of the preparation of the following publication, but the higher degree candidate, Aileen Wyllie, was the principal contributor to its conception, design, writing and revision.

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Michelle DiGiacomo

Patricia Davidson

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Michelle DiGiacomo

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Glossary

Attribute	A quality of a person.
Career growth	Learning new skills and putting them to work, taking on new challenges and responsibilities, improving credentials and management skills.
Career planning process	A process designed to help individuals examine their careers; evaluate their training and educational needs; and develop some specific action plans to maintain, enhance, and re-evaluate the relevance of their professional and managerial skills in a work environment that values rapid change and adaptation.
Casual academic	An employee engaged and paid by the hour, rather than employed on an ongoing basis or for a set period on a salary.
Early-career academic nurse (ECAN)	A registered nurse with substantial clinical experience, enrolled or completed a PhD and within seven years of obtaining an ongoing university position to progress a career.
Fixed mindset	The mindset of an individual who believes their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. A belief that talent alone creates success – without effort.
Growth mindset	The mindset of an individual who believes their talents can be developed through hard work, good strategies, and input from others, and that you can change yourself and the world around you.
Habits of mind	Patterns of intellectual behaviour that lead to productive actions. They mean we value one pattern of intellectual behaviour over another, and make choices about which patterns we should use at certain times.
Learning mindset	An individual's basic orientation towards the act of learning.
Mindset	A mindset is about expression and an approach toward a task. It is a collection of thoughts and beliefs that shape our thought habits, which in turn affect thinking, feelings and actions.
Objective career success	Commonly defined in terms of progress along a hierarchy of power or prestige, and measured by criteria such as salary, promotion rate, hierarchical level and/or status.
PECAN	Program for Early-Career Academic Nurses.
Sessional academic	A term used in some universities to describe casual academic employees, as casual academics are often employed for 'sessions' or semester teaching periods.

Abbreviations

CV	curriculum vitae
ECAN	Early-Career Academic Nurse
EDC	Engagement and Development Committee
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
PECAN	Program for Early-Career Academic Nurses

ABSTRACT

Background

There is an emerging body of literature on the experiences of early career academic nurses with a particular focus on their learning needs and how they can best be supported as they compete for success in a highly competitive and rapidly changing environment. Managing an academic career can be challenging and there is a need to fully understand the attitudes, abilities and habits that contribute to a successful career mindset. This knowledge will benefit both early career academics and higher education providers wishing to implement supportive interventions aimed at capacity building and retention.

Research Design and Methods

This study followed a group of early career academic nurses over a period of three years. The aim of the study was to explore their experiences of *shaping, strengthening* and *sustaining* career growth. A systematic literature review followed by a four phase-study was undertaken. Phase one explored the early career academic nurses' initial career journey. In phase two a supportive educational intervention was trialled and critically evaluated. Phase three consisted of collective narratives that identified key elements of participants' *growth mindset* and how it intersected with their career success; and Phase four was added using a narrative-based approach to represent the early career academic nurses' progress. A qualitative descriptive design was used with data thematically analysed using the six-phase approach of Braun, Clarke, and Gray (2017). This thesis is presented as a compilation of chapters and publications.

Key Findings

Early career academic nurses spend a great deal of time and energy aiming to construct a successful career. A supportive educational program that facilitated the development of attributes that support a growth mindset was found to engender success and generate opportunities for career progress. A *'growth mindset'* was viewed as the best way to understand and enhance personal abilities that assist with strengthening and sustaining the academic journey. The early career academic nurses in this study viewed support as a range

of factors and learning opportunities that allowed them to shape and strengthen their individual career path.

Conclusions

This study adds to the literature about early career academic nurse's long-term experiences in undertaking an academic career. It identified that building a successful academic career demands input from both the individuals and senior leadership. While the early career academic nurses must seek to develop dispositions to meet demands that accompany an academic career, higher education providers need to implement programs and supportive strategies that enhance the skills and abilities of early career academic nurses to promote their success and retention.