

# So you want to be an academic?

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- Thanks: Tom Keegan, Tony Patti, Anna Dixon
- Caveat: “It’s all about the science”. Everything below is a means to that primary end – i.e. what you need to do in *addition* to doing excellent science, to get a tenured academic position.

## PART I -- WHY

- This talk is about *how* to become a tenured university academic
  - Not about *what* you do as an academic [story for another day!]
- Begin with separate question: *Why* become a tenured university academic?
  - Good reasons:
    - Passionate about science
    - Passionate about research and teaching
    - Other personal reasons regarding a certain “fire within”
  - Bad reasons
    - Money, Ambition, Power, Prestige [e.g. desire to become a Prof ASAP]
    - Don’t know what else you want to do, don’t know what else you can do
  - NB: Ironic that those motivated by the “good reasons” are successful
  - “You want to be an academic? – you’re mad! – I heard that 100+ applications for one permanent position is not atypical – go where the opportunity is, avoid academia!”
    - Respond to this with two stories and their associated morals
      - Story #1: AFL Football team
        - Moral: don’t be put off by the challenge
          - Be attracted to the challenge
          - Thrive on the challenge
          - View every “blocker” or setback as an exciting obstacle to be ethically and inevitably overcome
      - Story #2: Usain Bolt [Olympic sprinting gold medallist]
        - Moral: The importance of small differences
          - importance of a little *strategy* [but with “naïve” passion at its core] – segue into Part II

## PART II -- HOW

- Core question: *How* become a tenured academic?
- “Royal road”: PhD → 1-3 Postdocs → Tenured academic position
- On conveyor belts and ticking clocks [postdoc/s = delicate transitional stage of your career]
- Crucial generic goals to score and skills to develop on the road to academia:
  - PhD seeking a postdoc:
    - Portfolio of relevant papers in international journals **A**
    - Crystal-clear & vibrant seminars on excellent research **B**
    - Job-application-writing and interview skills **C**
    - Importance of professional networks **D**
    - “Can we work with this person?” **E**
    - + any other specific criteria on the job advertisement
  - Postdoc seeking a tenured position
    - All of the above, *plus*
    - Citations for your papers
    - Clearly articulated vision for a research programme **F**
    - Grant-writing skills + successful grant applications **G**
    - Some teaching experience + capacity to teach well **H**
    - Supervision or co-supervision of research students **I**
    - Evidence of being a “good departmental citizen” **J**

- A: Portfolio of relevant papers in international journals
- B: Crystal-clear / vibrant seminars on excellent research [“Giving talks is a serious business”]
  - For many in the audience, this will be the only exposure to you
  - Audience will form lasting impression of you, based on your talk
  - Tailor to audience [e.g. 10 min PPT to panel vs tech. seminar]
  - Not too much detail
  - Big picture should shine through
  - Rehearse talk, get feedback, keep strictly to time
  - Etc.! – story for another day
- C: Job-application-writing and interview skills
  - Job application writing
    - Story for another day
  - Interview tips
    - Typical questions you need to prepare for:
      - Why should we hire you?
      - What research programme you will establish if hired?
      - How does your research mesh with school members?
      - Do you anticipate changing direction in 5 years? Why?
      - What courses would you be able to teach?
      - In a nutshell, what is your teaching philosophy?
      - What are your weaknesses?
      - What evidence do you have for research & teaching excellence?
      - Do you have any questions for us?
    - Things that impress panel members:
      - Interviewee has read some papers by school/panel members, and thought meaningfully about how their proposed research programme will align [neither too much nor too little] with current school members
      - I invite you to augment this list
    - Things that turn off panel members?
- D: Importance of professional networks
  - Within workplace [“don’t lock yourself up”; “make yourself indispensable”]
  - Within immediate geographic vicinity, and also nationally
  - Internationally [“conference presentations are important” ... ditto for conference lunches/dinners]
- E: “Can we work with this person?”
- F: Clearly articulated vision for *your* research programme
  - Should shine through from a cohesive subset of your papers
  - Should shine through in job application and interview
- G: Grant-writing skills + successful grant applications
  - Learn the craft [story for another day]
  - Read successful grants in your field ... and unsuccessful grants
  - “Remember the suitcases” ... three piles = YES // NO // MAYBE
  - “A certain lightness of touch” ... and a big weighting for track record
  - Purpose of grant is to fund your research programme. It is not a paper.
- H: Some teaching experience + capacity to teach well
  - In scoring permanent position, research valued more than teaching [contentious]
  - Previous teaching experience is often essential
  - Seek to get some teaching experience during postdoctoral fellowship (e.g. 6-10 lectures per annum, together with associated formal assessment teaching quality).
- I: Supervision or co-supervision of research students
- J: Evidence of being a “good departmental citizen”

Some random tips:

1. Importance of developing *your* research programme – need to be a leader, not a follower
2. On the importance of thinking outside the square, and of “finishing things off”
3. Live a little dangerously, be creative, don’t do exactly what you are told
4. Select exciting research projects [this is quite distinct from fashionable projects]
5. Continually ask yourself the following “Who Cares?” questions:
  - a. Why should the world care about the paper I am writing?
  - b. Or the research that I am doing?
  - c. Or the work that I am proposing to do?
6. Strive for total clarity in your paper writing, grant writing, research discussions and talks.
  
7. Seek postdoctoral fellowships that further your career [some will hold it back]
8. Be prepared to go far and wide
9. What is it *really* like to work in group X? – find out from people currently in the group
10. Apply for multiple positions
  
11. Get a mentor [“research aunt or uncle”]
  
12. Excellent succinct book which I recommend you read: *A PhD is not Enough: A Guide to Survival in Science*, Peter J. Feibelman.
  
13. There are other excellent careers besides academia, which are equally rewarding, and which make direct use of many of the skills that you develop as a PhD student:
  - a. industrial research,
  - b. CSIRO,
  - c. forming a start-up company,
  - d. secondary teaching,
  - e. patent law,
  - f. management consulting,
  - g. financial modelling,
  - h. forestry,
  - i. museums,
  - j. drug companies,
  - k. etc.

*“It’s all about the science” – everything above is a secondary means to that primary end – we are all different – seek your own way – accept or reject or modify the advice of others – discuss with colleagues – continually evolve – thrive.*