

1. Making academic superheroes

Faced with the tangle of uncertain employment arrangements, diminishing resources, performance-based cultures, overworked professional role models, problematic paradigms of success, and fearful of making a wrong career move in this demanding, unforgiving culture, many scholars struggle to establish and sustain academic careers, let alone satisfy institutional demands for ‘academic superheroes’ (Pitt and Mewburn, 2016, p. 99). This volume is a research-informed response to the challenge, intended to help anyone contemplating or developing an academic career in the arts, social sciences or humanities navigate their way through a successful, sustainable and rewarding vocation, balanced thoughtfully with personal and professional needs.

Precariousness and fear characterize the careers of many contemporary academics. Widespread redundancies, growing levels of casual employment, unrelenting pressures from an increasingly global marketplace, new forms of professional surveillance and mounting institutional ‘productivity’ demands see increasingly apprehensive scholars in perilous professional positions (see, for example, Dyer et al., 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Gornall et al., 2014; Grove, 2016; Kern et al., 2014; Scott, 2006). Evidence of anxiety can be seen in multiplying calls for mentoring, staff development programmes, and other forms of career support (e.g., Ferguson and Wheat, 2015; Hemmings, 2015). Academics have less and less room for wrong turns or diversions down cul-de-sacs on the high road to academic success. While this book can do little about the structural circumstances underpinning unstable university employment, on the basis of its ethnographic work clarifying the ‘lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and ground’ (McGranahan, 2014, p. 23) of academics as a cultural group, it is intended to go some way to minimize anxieties felt by early-career, as well as more senior scholars.

The fact that we work today in ever more competitive academic environments is evidenced by the growing significance attached to national and international rankings as well as publication numbers and research grant values (*The Economist*, 2015), the heightened importance of publicly available online markers of scholarly productivity

(e.g., Google Scholar's h-index [or Hirsch index] and i-10 index citation scores; ResearchGate's impact points), and the growth of online teaching quality evaluations (e.g., Rate My Professors). Despite the development of teaching-related measures, academia's intensifying competitive, performance-based culture is dominated by numerical measures of research activity. In the flurry of numbers, qualities such as influencing students, teaching effectiveness or community engagement, which cannot be simply quantified or easily compared across disciplines, have tended to be sidelined. Neoliberal, managerialist influences that underpin and sustain this cultural shift have also marginalized more diverse understandings of academic success (e.g., Bostock, 2014; Sutherland, 2015) that embrace matters such as life satisfaction and useful societal contributions. Rather than protesting neoliberalizing tendencies, through its attention to 'objective' and 'subjective' measures of career success, this book acknowledges the material characteristics of contemporary universities while endeavouring to support the human needs of the academic staff who sustain them.

Competition and the consequential emergence of institutional hierarchies (Taylor et al., 2016; *The Economist*, 2015) point to another foundation for this book. In an ever more competitive and stratified academic environment, and over and above their other advantages, postgraduate students and early-career academics (ECAs) in high-status, wealthy universities arguably have access to high-flying, well-connected mentors and colleagues. This affords them greater support and competitive opportunities than those available to equally gifted colleagues at other institutions. By laying out publicly some new as well as more established ideas and perspectives on approaches to career success, this volume is intended to help level that playing field.

Notwithstanding the possibility that the claim about differential access to high-quality mentors is flawed, there is certainly broad worth in codifying the kind of advice or counsel increasingly busy senior academics may take for granted or be unwilling or unable to share in detail because of their own escalating professional commitments or because they believe that "good" students find their way on their own, while the remainder cannot be helped' (Feibelman, 2011, p. xi). As Daniel Nehring (2013) points out, while many emerging scholars do all the right things – teaching well, publishing in the right journals, securing grants – they still do not have stable academic careers. He suggests that the 'informal rules and techniques of academic labour often remain opaque to ... early-career scholars' because postgraduate programmes are too large and senior academics are too busy to offer the kind of support that 'might have worked at Oxbridge in 1900'.

To further illustrate the intensifying need for professional signposts, and by way of personal example, I once had a selection committee's recommendation to appoint me to a senior academic leadership position in a world-class university rejected by that university's provost because of a career decision I had made 20 years earlier. Some senior guidance on that decision at the time could have been helpful. By setting out advice that some institutions and senior colleagues mistakenly assume 'everyone knows'; describing behaviours and actions successful academics have made without necessarily being aware of their importance or significance until much later; and recounting lessons learned from bitter experience, this book may help smooth some academics' career paths. Feibelman (2011, p. 142) reminds us: 'It is far better to learn from the bad experiences of others than from your own'.

National and international university competition is accompanied by heightened – if not extraordinary – expectations of staff. Though not new, government and public exhortations for universities to do more with less have intensified and academic staff bear the brunt of that. For example, in their disturbing analysis of academic job descriptions in Australian universities, Pitt and Mewburn (2016) refer to the institutional demand for 'academic super-heroes'. These are junior to mid-career scholars who, in their quest for a job, can satisfy up to 21 *essential* selection criteria, embracing discipline-specific knowledge, research performance, administrative duties, teaching prowess, networking and continuing professional development, interpersonal skills, corporate citizenship – and more – listed in a single position description! As Pitt and Mewburn (2016, p. 99) put it so colourfully:

This new academic ... is a multi-talented, always ready and available worker that we have started to label the 'academic super-hero', capable of being everything to everyone and leaping over 24 KSC [key selection criteria] in a single job application.

The academic super-hero conforms to university strategic priorities (including in directing their research focus and undertaking pastoral care for students and colleagues) and is always alert, if not alarmed. At any moment our hero must be ready to deal with the multiple uncertainties that beset the higher education sector ... all the while collecting business cards for that next round of student placements, soothing hurt feelings and smiling graciously at the crowds of prospective students at Open Day while publishing prodigiously and creating innovative learning opportunities for their students across multiple media.

The challenge for ECAs (aka budding academic superheroes) is to respond fruitfully to growing expectations but in ways that allow them to work sustainably and well, while remaining healthy and sane. This book

is about achieving those ends. But let me make clear that this volume is not some form of apologist response to the apparently unceasing and escalating demands of contemporary universities on academic staff. It is intended instead to assist scholars to prioritize and manage effectively the various demands they encounter, in ways that are humane as well as personally and professionally viable. This brings us to a related point. The rhetoric of success that pervades universities focuses first on research, then on teaching, and then, to a lesser degree, community engagement and service. Much less attention, if any, is given to other estimations and components of academic success. Though the idea runs counter to the neoliberalizing tendencies of contemporary universities (see for discussions, Schram, 2016; Shore and Davidson, 2014), it is time for more nuanced conversations about paths to success. Incorporating ideas of work–life balance, health, well-being and happiness this book is intended to be part of those discussions.

Finally, although it begins from a broader conception of success than the customary trinity of teaching, research and service, this book is not a detailed examination of the meaning and constituents of the concept. That research is left for others (Archer, 2008; Arthur et al., 2005; Kern et al., 2015; Laud and Johnson, 2012). Instead, starting from work such as Sutherland's (2015) expanded conception of academic success, this book offers a discussion of pathways through success, being informed by extant literature, extensive discussions with colleagues, and over 30 years of observation and experience around the world.

Some evidence that there is a need for volumes such as this is apparent from the emergence over the past 10–15 years of systematic initiatives to support scholars in the early stages of their career. These include the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programme offered by over 300 higher education institutions in the United States under the sponsorship of the Association of American Colleges & Universities and the Council of Graduate Schools; the wonderful US-based Geography Faculty Development Alliance (GFDA); Australia's institutional Graduate Certificates in University Teaching; Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education Teaching and Graduate Teaching Assistant courses in most UK universities as well as the Higher Education Academy's 'New to Teaching' programmes, plus more ad hoc developments (e.g., Nigeria's generic programmes at the institutional level; professional mentoring in Ireland – Donnelly and McSweeney, 2011). Those projects have been accompanied by helpful volumes on academic career development, with notable examples including Shelda Debowski's (2012) *The New Academic*; Solem et al.'s (2009) edited collection *Aspiring Academics*; Robert Boice's (2000) classic *Advice for New Faculty Members*; and Wendy

Crone's (2010) *Survive and Thrive*. Others include Cantwell and Scevak (2010), Furstenberg (2013), Goldsmith et al. (2001), Grant and Sherrington (2006) and Johnson (2011) as well as volumes focussed more finely on specific aspects of securing and performing academic work (e.g., Belcher, 2009; Blumberg, 2014; Vick and Furlong, 2016). This book joins that swell of activity. Drawing on decades of observation and experience, it offers accessible support to university scholars on effective ways of developing and sustaining a successful academic career.

A focal point of this book is holistic academic career development. Following Sutherland et al. (2013, p. 55), scholars who understand themselves to be researchers, teachers and academic citizens are more likely to thrive than their more single-minded colleagues. But there is actually more to a truly successful academic career than the scholarly trinity of teaching, research and service. On the basis of international research, Sutherland (2015) reveals broader conceptions of academic career success (Table 1.1), which embrace a range of objective (e.g., research productivity, teaching performance, salary) and subjective markers (e.g., life satisfaction, freedom, influencing students). She notes that while objective indicators remain dominant in the literature – as well as in professional and institutional discussions of success – they are often ill defined in the minds of (early-career) academics to whom the measures are applied. And she goes on to observe that the subjective markers call for more research and practical consideration. To that call this book is a response.

Table 1.1 provides a helpful and comprehensive picture of the various faces of academic career success. On the basis of extensive investigation and experience, one purpose of this book is to discuss the ways those markers of success can be achieved. For the sake of comprehensibility – and with the usual important caveats about the diversity of individuals and their career paths – it does this by providing advice and guidance structured in a loose 'chronology', setting out strategies that may be useful as one moves through a 'balanced' (i.e., involving both research and teaching) academic career in the HASS (humanities, arts and social sciences) disciplines. The book comprises five main parts. The first covers foundational material on getting qualified and securing good initial advice on career planning and development. The second is very much about making an important initial impact, including getting known in relevant scholarly circles and learning about academic cultures. The third deals with the very important subject of securing good employment. The fourth covers work-related aspects of everyday performance as an 'academic superhero', including publishing, teaching, securing funding and engaging

Table 1.1 Constructions of academic career success, as perceived by early-career academics

Objective Career Success in Academia	Subcategories Generated from the Data	Subjective Career Success in Academia	Subcategories Generated from the Data
Research productivity	External grant funding Publishing in high-profile journals/with reputable publishing houses/presses Generating more postgraduate students Launching a research programme/leading a research team First/last/sole authorship	Life satisfaction	Happiness Balancing work, family and leisure Keeping stress under control Staying healthy
Promotion and tenure	Early promotion or tenure Meeting requirements in research, teaching and service (all rounder) Promotion to professor/a personal chair	Contribution to society	Making a lasting contribution to human knowledge Influencing people's behaviour or thinking Connecting with/changing the local community
Status	Disciplinary reputation International invitations to collaborate on research Working in a reputable university Research and teaching awards Being given departmental (or wider university) responsibilities	Freedom	To choose one's own research direction To work collectively not just individually To buy out teaching to focus on research To do interdisciplinary work To teach in one's speciality area/s

Objective Career Success in Academia	Subcategories Generated from the Data	Subjective Career Success in Academia	Subcategories Generated from the Data
Teaching performance	High student evaluation scores Teaching large classes	Job satisfaction	Feeling confident as a researcher and teacher Receiving positive, unsolicited feedback on teaching from students and colleagues Maintaining balance in all academic roles Building a research niche/moulding the field Mentoring/inspiring colleagues
Salary	Adequate salary important, but not a key marker of success	Influencing students	Influencing postgraduate students' opportunities Challenging students' thinking Inspiring indigenous and/or female students ^a 'Grandparenting' as an adviser

Note: a. To this I would add inspiring students from underprivileged backgrounds.

Source: Sutherland (2015).

with work-related communities. The book's final part is one of the most important: how to preserve your academic superpowers. The material in this part of the book covers such matters as keeping refreshed and staying happy and healthy. While these issues are located last in the book, a sustainable career requires that they be accounted for throughout that career.

The book's organization is not meant to suggest there is any specific, inviolable sequence of events or steps you must proceed through to have a successful career. This volume is not intended to be a textbook-like representation of some form of standard career development. The layout is an organizational device for the book and one that presents advice in accord with a pattern many people aspiring to become 'academic superheroes' follow. Issues and challenges discussed in this book need to

be addressed continuously and sometimes simultaneously across a career. Some will have more or less significance at different times.¹

It is envisioned that this volume will be of use to prospective, early-career and more senior scholars, or indeed to the same scholar passing through these different occupational stages. The pages that follow focus on HASS, though my own career background as a social scientist means that there may be embedded in the book some unintentional partiality as well as some blindness to the needs and requirements of, say, some scholars in the humanities. However, being conscious of this latter possibility, I have made a specific point of seeking out additional counsel and ideas from senior scholars in the research for this book.

The book is based primarily on informal but deeply interested participant observation (Gold, 1958; Ingold, 2014) conducted over a successful 30-year career as a teaching and research academic. Observations have been made during experiences as a postgraduate student in Australia, New Zealand and the United States; as a visiting fellow in China, England, Malaysia, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore and the United States; and as a lecturer and professor in New Zealand and Australia.

As Kawulich (2005) notes, participant observation 'is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities'. It involves being physically and socially close to participants, experiencing activities and incidents first hand (Sandiford, 2015, pp. 414–15), and 'establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting' (Emerson et al., 2001, p. 352). While some scholars (e.g., Bernard, 1994) argue that participant observation requires removing oneself from the observational setting or community and immersing oneself in the observational data to comprehend and write about it, that removal or distancing may not be possible in theory or practice given the various networks and sets of relationships researchers have with their 'field'. Nonetheless, careful reflection on one's observations is both possible and requisite. While my observations, deliberations and recommendations are inevitably incomplete, partial and biased, founded on my position as a middle-class, white, heterosexual male who has worked as a human

¹ Despite these aspirations to fluidity the book's focus means that it may – unfortunately – fall into that class of cultural stories that Dyer et al. (2016, p. 309) suggest 'reify a standard career path and "other" those not willing or able to access such a path'.

geographer in English-speaking institutions almost exclusively, they have been facilitated and tempered by frequent public outings. To empower contemplation and to expose its outcomes to daylight's harsh reality, parts of this book have been used as discussion and resource material for students and ECAs in Australia, China, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. Through those outings, many of the ideas here have been exposed to a form of highly critical participant checking involving diverse others (for a discussion, see Stratford and Bradshaw, 2016). Nonetheless, while the book is intended to have broad geographical value it is inevitable that it will be characterized to some extent by a degree of insularity.

Around the world, university scholars are struggling to satisfy the many and often growing demands placed upon them. Teaching, community service and contributions to university administration are important and pressing components of these demands, and everywhere it seems there are new and more strident expectations to teach more students better; to more fully engage with professional and social communities; to publish high-quality books and papers, and more of them; to get more grant money; and to otherwise develop and then maintain ceaselessly a stellar career. These pressures come at considerable, and commonly acknowledged, costs that may include loneliness, divorce, stress, unhappiness, ill health and career abandonment. It is to the many scholars facing these challenges that this book is dedicated.

