Succeeding in Academic Medicine Applications

The health of local populations depends in part upon the considerable contribution clinical academics make to research and teaching alongside their clinical practice. The UK Integrated Academic Foundation Programme offers newly qualified doctors an opportunity to explore academia as a career by developing skills in research, education or leadership/management alongside their clinical training.

Being successful in applications for an academic training position, whether AFP, ACF or clinical lectureship, is about preparing and practising the right way – many candidates fail to demonstrate just how good they really are and therefore miss out. This book has been put together using insights from successful trainees and focuses on covering the skills that produce results.
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Rele Ologunde

Academic Clinical Fellow in Otolaryngology,
University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust and University of Birmingham
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A career in academic medicine is in equal parts rewarding and challenging. The opportunity to be involved in driving through research that underpins our understanding of complex diseases and trialling novel therapeutic interventions is thrilling yet demanding. However, as a clinical academic the pursuit of research interests cannot be done at the expense of attaining excellence in clinical competencies. As such, the demands of an academic career put many off. However, those who choose this path no doubt share a common longing and fulfilment from pursuing uncharted waters. This journey involves constantly learning, all with the end goal of advancing our understanding of disease and illness, bettering medical practice and improving patient outcomes. Ultimately the adventure into the unknown comes with the greatest risk but also the greatest potential and sense of fulfilment.
The National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) integrated academic training pathway formalised academic training in the UK in 2006 with the creation of a run-through training pathway that incorporated both clinical and academic competencies. The integrated pathway is a unique opportunity to create alignment between academics and clinicians, bringing direct patient relevance to translational scientific research. Recruitment to all stages of this pathway is extremely competitive and as such, academic positions attract a great deal of prestige. Successful candidates will often go on to have long-lasting and fruitful careers in academia. However, enjoyment of such a career does not have to be limited to a privileged few.

If you are reading this book you are no doubt motivated to give yourself the greatest possible chance of securing your dream academic job and excelling in it. Succeeding at interview and during your academic programme is about preparing and practising the right way. Too many good candidates fail to demonstrate just how good they really are and therefore miss out. However, preparing to succeed doesn’t begin once you get an interview or even when you begin to consider applying for an academic post. Preparing to succeed starts much earlier on. To this end, the first half of this book focuses on the things that you can do to put yourself in the best position possible, years before that interview. The second half of the book discusses the ways in which to excel at interview and in your academic career. Anecdotally, many consultants who participate in national selection for trainee posts often comment that they can tell whether a person will be successful or not, simply based on the level and quality of evidence within their portfolio. For candidates not performing as strongly on other aspects of the selection process, the portfolio provides a strong boost to the overall score. As such, a significant portion of this book is devoted to ways in which your portfolio can be improved to set you apart from others and dramatically improve your chances of success.
This book has been put together using insights from successful trainees, to allow all applicants to benefit from advice that comes only from experience; it focuses on teaching the skills that produce results rather than the knowledge.

Good luck in your future academic career!

_Rele Ologunde_
Writing this book was harder than I thought but more rewarding than I could have imagined. I am eternally grateful to my parents for their constant support, sacrifice and prayers; my wife, Vicky, for her patience and forbearance and my brother for his guidance and wisdom.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACF  Academic Clinical Fellowship
AFP  Academic Foundation Programme
AUoA  Academic Unit of Application
CL  Clinical Lectureship
CPD  Continuing Professional Development
FP  Foundation Programme
FY  Foundation year
GCP  good clinical practice
GMC  General Medical Council
IATP  Integrated Academic Training Pathway
M&M  morbidity and mortality
MRes  Masters in Research
NIHR  National Institute for Health Research
PROM  Patient Reported Outcome Measure
QoL  quality of life
RCT  randomised controlled trial
ST  Specialty Trainee
STARSurg  Student Audit and Research in Surgery
UKFPO  United Kingdom Foundation Programme Office
WBA  workplace-based assessment
In the UK, application to the Academic Foundation Programme and Academic Clinical Fellowships are coordinated through Oriel, an online portal for recruitment to postgraduate medical, dental, public health, healthcare science and pharmacy training programmes. The portal allows you to view vacancies, complete application forms, book interviews and accept offers of appointment.

3.1 Academic Foundation Programme (AFP)

Applicants for the Academic Foundation Programme are currently nominated by their medical school as being eligible to apply, and in the main, this eligibility extends to all candidates who have completed the course successfully up to the point of application. Applicants holding, or due to be awarded, a primary medical degree from a non-UK university need to apply for assessment of eligibility directly to the United Kingdom Foundation
Programme Office (UKFPO). Applicants are then invited to register and apply for the Academic Foundation Programme, typically in the autumn of each year.

Applications to the AFP typically open earlier than applications to the (non-academic) foundation programme, and candidates can apply for both. At the time of writing, applicants are asked to register for an Oriel account and choose two (out of fifteen) Academic Units of Application (AUoAs). AUoAs broadly represent partnerships between foundation schools and their affiliated universities and are divided geographically across the UK. The application form varies depending on the AUoA that you are applying to and their particular areas of interest and enquiry.

Choosing an Academic Unit of Application
It is important to do your research on the AFP that each AUoA offers as they do differ, both in terms of research focus and of how academic time is protected and delivered. Some AUoAs allow applicants to devise their own research topic, whereas others may have set projects for applicants to take up. Both have merit but it is important not to commit yourself to two years of academic training on a project in which you have little interest. Conversely, if you do not have a particular desire to pursue a specific field of research or develop a project that you have previously worked on, a ready-made project may suit you. You may also find it useful to speak to previous academic trainees who have completed the programme in the area to which you wish to apply.

Academic achievements
The application form for the AFP allows candidates to provide evidence of additional academic achievement. The specifics may vary from one AUoA to another, but by and large most will allow you to provide evidence for the following categories:
• Higher postgraduate degrees attained (e.g. MSc, MD, PhD)
• Presentation of a poster at a regional, national or international meeting
• Giving an oral presentation at a regional, national or international meeting
• Prizes for academic excellence within medical school
• National or international prizes
• Outstanding achievement in an extra-curricular activity
• Research or travel fellowships (excluding elective bursaries or prizes).

In scoring candidates’ additional academic achievements, AUoAs will vary in how much credit they give each item of evidence. The academic prospectus of each AUoA may provide further guidance in this regard.

‘White space’ questions
White space questions are so called because they are open-ended, requiring a free text response. As such, they are considered a more challenging part of the AFP application with no clear ‘correct’ answer. In truth, there are no wrong answers but certainly some answers are better than others. The advantage of this part of the application is that it gives you an opportunity to make your application stand out from others, beyond the number of academic accolades accrued. However, not all AUoAs include white space questions.

Typically, the questions asked in this section vary between AUoAs and are only available to view and respond to for a time-limited period during the application process. During this time, you can save your answers and return to the application.

Questions asked by AUoAs in the ‘white space’ section tend to focus on similar themes, including – but not limited to – research, teaching, management, motivations for the AFP, teamwork and contribution to academia during medical school.
Example ‘white space’ questions:

- Describe your research experience to date.
- Describe your teaching and/or management experience to date.
- Give an example of a research project, management or teaching experience and its significance to your application for the AFP.
- What are the teaching and research skills that you would most like to take away from your AFP? Outline your strategy for acquiring or developing these skills.
- Describe a time, that will be relevant to your foundation training, when you have worked as a successful member of a team and identify your role and contribution to this success.
- Give an example to describe your contribution to academic life during your medical school career and how it will be relevant to an academic medical career.
- Describe your academic and non-academic achievements and their significance to your application.
- Describe how you would set out to answer a research question that has arisen from a specific clinical case that you have been involved in.
- How would training on the AFP contribute to your overall career goals?

**Box 3.1 Example of an excellent answer to a white space question**

**QUESTION:** What are the teaching and research skills (maximum of three) that you would most like to take away from this Academic Programme, and that you do not already have? Briefly outline your strategy for acquiring or developing these skills.

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ANSWER: I would like to develop my understanding of educational theory by undertaking a formal qualification in education such as a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, as offered by the University Learning Institute. I would also like to consolidate this by further developing my teaching skills through the medical school Teacher Development Programme.

To date I have had relatively little formal teaching in statistics and so I would be keen to access the medical statistics course through the Academic Foundation Programme (AFP). Having spoken to previous AFP doctors in the region, I understand that there are a wealth of courses available to local trainees, and I would seek to register for these early on so that I can gain skills to complement my research activities.

I would also like to improve my skills in epidemiology. I would go about doing this by enrolling on relevant courses offered by the university. I would then put these skills into practice by undertaking a research project consisting of analysis of epidemiological data, in line with my interests in craniofacial surgery. I would, for example, complete an evaluation of the causes and incidence of maxillofacial injuries in the UK in the last ten years.

The answer given to the question in Box 3.1 is good, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the question clearly asks for a maximum of three teaching and research skills and the candidate has listed and expanded on exactly three. Clearly there are no additional marks to be gained from listing any more than the number specifically asked for. Secondly, the candidate has chosen a mix of
both teaching and research skills, thereby addressing both aspects of the question. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the candidate has outlined a clear strategy for how they would acquire these skills. Furthermore, they have given specific examples of how they would then put these newly acquired skills to use during their academic programme. The candidate has successfully and succinctly addressed all aspects of the questions asked, with specific examples given where appropriate.

### Box 3.2 Example of a poor answer to a white space question

**QUESTION:** Academic medicine requires an individual to work successfully in a team. Describe a time, relevant to your foundation training, when you worked as a successful member of a team and identify your role and contribution to this success.

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**ANSWER:** As a core committee member of my medical school Surgical Society I participated in the running of our national surgical conference. I had been delegated a specific role to oversee the running of a practical station in basic surgical skills (BSS). I had to liaise with other committee members to ensure that the timings of the workshop did not overrun onto the allocated time of workshops occurring simultaneously. This allowed my colleagues, who were coordinating the concurrent workshops, to confidently plan the timings of their own stations. I also developed a successful working relationship with the surgical trainees facilitating the BSS workshop. I ensured that equipment was prepared well in advance of delegates arriving,
whilst also regularly replenishing consumables. My time management skills and proactive approach to resourcing equipment ensured that the workshop ran to time and was well equipped. My experience of working in multiple teams simultaneously during the conference has greatly improved my interpersonal, conflict resolution and priority setting skills. These skills will help me in being able to successfully oversee tasks that have been delegated to me whilst liaising with numerous members of a clinical team.

Although the answer given above describes how the candidate has worked in a team and the skills that they have gained from the experience, the answer suffers from one of the basic cardinal errors that individuals often make in applications; they have failed to actually answer the question. Firstly, the question asks for a description of a time that would be relevant to foundation training. Whilst you may well arrange teaching courses and other extra-curricular activities during foundation training, this is beyond the scope and focus of foundation training. As such, the example given by the candidate lacks relevance to the question being asked.

It is useful to draft answers to ‘white space’ questions early and ask colleagues or friends, both medical and non-medical, to read them for clarity and understanding. As a rule of thumb, a good approach to seeking feedback on your work is to adopt a ‘pyramid of feedback’ approach, whereby you start at the bottom and work your way up. You would thereby initially seek peer feedback, then near peer feedback, then input from a senior academic or clinical colleague and finally, if possible, perhaps from a more established...
colleague, such as a consultant or professor. At each stage of the pyramid you would revise your draft in light of the comments received. There are numerous frameworks that may help with formulating answers to questions such as those described above and a good reference text for this is Medical Interviews by Olivier Picard et al., details of which are given in the further reading section at the end of this chapter.

Once the window for submission of applications has closed, AUoA will shortlist candidates based on predefined criteria. Applicants will receive one of the following outcomes: offer of an interview, being put on the waiting list, or application unsuccessful.

Successful AFP applicants will receive offers from AUoAs in advance of the Foundation Programme (FP) allocation process, and those who accept their offer will not be included in the FP allocation. Unsuccessful AFP applicants, or those who decline all AFP offers, will be included automatically in the FP allocation. If an applicant accepts an AFP offer and then decides to decline it, the applicant will be withdrawn from the entire process, including FP.

3.2 Academic Clinical Fellowship (ACF)

The application process of the Academic Clinical Fellowship is much the same as that of the AFP, discussed in Section 3.1. ACFs are offered in a number of specialties and start at differing times during training, most commonly at ST1 (Specialty Trainee year 1, following foundation training) and ST3 (after core training in medicine or surgery). All ACFs are advertised on Oriel and applications typically open in the autumn of each year.

Choosing an ACF

Academic Clinical Fellowships vary greatly, both in the focus of the research project (clinical vs. laboratory) and also in the way
academic time is split. Furthermore, some ACFs come with the expectation that successful applicants will undertake a higher degree, such as an MSc or MRes, alongside their ACF. In most cases funding will be provided as part of the ACF to cover the costs of the higher degree.

It is also important to choose a geographical location that is compatible with your long-term goals. Unlike AFPs, which only last two years, an ACF is a six- to eight-year commitment, depending on what stage of training you start the programme. Upon completion of the three-year ACF you will return to full-time clinical training unless you defer, to take time out for a PhD or other activity.

Finally, it is also useful to do some research about the supervisor of the ACF and the research team that you will be working in. It may even be worthwhile arranging an informal meeting to find out more about the programme and work of the research team.

**Academic application**
Once you have shortlisted the ACFs you wish to apply to, you will have to complete an application for each individually. Some of the content in the applications may overlap. You will typically be asked to provide three referees: a Consultant or Educational Supervisor from your current employment, someone to provide you with an academic reference, and another referee from your medical training. You will then be asked to provide an employment history going back to the date of your primary medical qualification.

**Academic achievements**
As with the application for the AFP, candidates applying for the ACF are asked to list additional academic achievements. However, ACF applications tend to be more prescriptive about what they require. The following categories are examples of
additional academic achievements that may be included in an ACF application:

- Additional completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and qualifications
- Undergraduate and postgraduate prizes, awards and distinctions
- Training courses relevant to your specialty of application that you have attended, and details of courses that you are currently undertaking
- Outstanding achievements outside the field of medicine
- Relevant presentations in your specialty of application
- Relevant publications in your specialty of application.

Most applications will ask you to state whether the presentations that you list in your application were poster or oral presentations and whether they were delivered to a local body or a regional or national society. Similarly, with publications most applications will ask for full citation details, including a PubMed link or alternative. For both presentations and publications, many applications will also ask you to state your role in or contribution to the work (e.g. first author, primary investigator).

‘White space’ questions
As with the AFP application, ACF applications have a varying number of white space questions. These cover similar themes to those in the AFP application, such as research, teaching, management and motivations for the ACF.

Example ‘white space’ questions:

- What experience do you have of delivering teaching? This may include a teaching skills course or a formal qualification in teaching, if undertaken.
- What is your experience of clinical audit to date?
- Describe how you believe you meet the person specification
The application process (AFP and ACF)

for the programme you are applying for. Include the particular skills and attributes that make you suitable for a career in this specialty.

• Provide evidence of activities and achievements which demonstrate your commitment to a career in this specialty and/or have led to the development of skills relevant to a career in this specialty.

• Give brief details of all research projects and/or relevant research experience that you have undertaken or are undertaking, including methods used. Indicate your level of involvement and your exact role in the research team, detailing when this took place, your time commitment, your contribution/involvement and source of funding.

• Describe why you want this particular Academic Clinical Fellowship, indicating your medium- and long-term career goals in relation to an academic career in this specialty area.

Shortlisting

The shortlisting panel for each ACF will vary in how much credit or emphasis they place on different aspects of the application form, when it comes to determining candidates to invite for interview. The additional documents provided on Oriel for each application may provide further guidance. Once shortlisting has been completed, applicants are either offered an interview, put on the waiting list or are unsuccessful.

It is worthwhile reading through the NIHR Academic Clinical Fellowship Guidance for Recruitment and Appointment, which is updated annually, for the most recent person specification, interview scoring criteria, and essential and desirable applicant criteria. This guide is available to download from the NIHR website, www.nihr.ac.uk.
Further reading

**AFP**
- General Medical Council’s section on Ethical guidance for doctors – [www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors](http://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors)
- UKFPO Applicant Guidance – [www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk/content/resource-bank](http://www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk/content/resource-bank)

**ACF**
- ACF interview scoring criteria (updated yearly on [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk))
- ACF shortlisting criteria (updated yearly on [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk))
- NIHR Academic Clinical Fellowships (ACFs) Recruitment Information Pack (updated yearly on [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk))
- NIHR ACF Academic Person Specification (updated yearly on [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk))
- NIHR ACF FAQs (updated yearly on [www.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.nihr.ac.uk))
The application process (AFP and ACF)

**AFP and ACF**

- Oriel – www.oriel.nhs.uk