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Academic posts at The University of Melbourne

28 years of history

General practice registrars have the opportunity to undertake an academic post during their training. This 12 month part time post provides an opportunity to train in various facets of the emerging area of primary care research. The Department of General Practice (DGP) at The University of Melbourne (UoM) has hosted academic registrars for the past 28 years. Over this time, some important changes have occurred.

When the academic post program first commenced at the UoM in the early 1980s, registrars were coupled to an academic general practice supervisor for both their research and clinical work and posts were often spread over 2 years. The program has now evolved into a 12 month posting and since 2002, a centralised application and funding process has been administered by General Practice Education and Training (GPET). Academic registrars must develop a structured learning plan with their university supervisor and part time clinical placements are now organised through the registrar's regional training provider. The current guidelines for the academic post can be found on the GPET website.¹

The current academic program at the UoM DGP is well structured. It includes a comprehensive orientation program, ongoing research training and regular university supervisor mentoring. It is an expectation that registrars will present their work at least once during the year at a department seminar or conference. Registrars are involved in teaching and may also complete

the Melbourne Teaching Certificate² or work toward a graduate certificate³ during their year at the university.

Some of the changes and improvements have occurred in response to feedback from previous academic registrars at the UoM DGP. Then in 2011, a formal quality improvement activity was conducted – which surveyed former ARs of the 28 year program – in order to comprehensively explore their experiences, and educational and career pathways. Seventy-seven percent (33/43) of former academic registrars at UoM DGP completed a 10 question electronic survey. Survey respondents undertook a range of roles during their academic post, from the usual research project and medical student teaching, to more diverse roles such as curriculum development (36%), medical editing (6%) and coordination of medical and nursing courses (21%). Each respondent carried out at least one research project during their time at the university. Reflecting the diversity that exists within general practice, their research topics were equally diverse (*Table 1*), and 49% of these registrar studies were published.

A large number of the 43 survey respondents have continued to pursue their area of interest after completion of their academic post, including 18 (13 masters, five PhDs) who are either currently enrolled, or have completed a research higher degree. In addition, respondents have pursued a range of roles since completing their post – from owning a practice, teaching medical students or registrars in their clinics, to ongoing academic roles and work in the media or the arts. Regardless of their chosen career path, 100% of respondents said they

Table 1. Research topics explored by survey respondents (listed from most frequently covered)

- Workforce
- Chronic disease
- Hospital/GP interface
- Depression
- Complementary therapies
- Medical education
- Prescribing
- Computers in general practice
- Obstetrics
- Sexual health
- Cancer screening
- Geriatrics
- Palliative care

would recommend an academic post to current registrars.

Survey respondents said their overwhelming support for the academic post was influenced by their positive experiences as academic registrars at UoM DGP. Other positive experiences described included teaching medical students. Twenty-three (70%) respondents are continuing to teach medical students today, and 17 said this was influenced by their academic post experience. Other positive experiences cited included a good support structure within the program, mentorship, teamwork and collegiality, exposure to general practice research and training, publications, workload diversity, and the post providing an entry point to ongoing academic work with support and opportunities for career development.

Other countries recognise the value of research training for general practice registrars.

In The Netherlands, a 6 year program combines general practice and research training culminating in a PhD, in addition to the completion of clinical general practice training. In 2011, GPET made available a second academic year, awarding it to six returning registrars, including two from the UoM. This allows consolidation of academic skills and the possibility of pursuing a research higher degree for these registrars.

The survey was part of the important process of continually improving the academic post at the UoM for future academic registrars. It highlights positive outcomes and suggests that completing an academic post can provide general practice registrars with the opportunity to consider an academic career. Previous UoM DGP academic registrars are now engaged in a broad range of roles and are linked by a sense of collegiality, a willingness to continue teaching and to facilitate research in general practice. The authors strongly encourage current and future general practice registrars to consider enriching their general practice training through the experience of an academic post.

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