

# Surviving and succeeding as an early career academic:

Personal characteristics to  
help you succeed



# SURVIVING AND SUCCEEDING AS AN EARLY CAREER ACADEMIC: PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS TO HELP YOU SUCCEED

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This booklet is part of the suite of resources developed from the Ako Aotearoa-funded project *Success, productivity and satisfaction in academia: The experiences of early career academics in New Zealand*, led by Kathryn Sutherland, Victoria University of Wellington.

For the full report and to download all resources go to: [www.akoaooteaoroa.ac.nz/early-career-academics](http://www.akoaooteaoroa.ac.nz/early-career-academics)

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**A recent Ako Aotearoa-funded research project with early career academics at all eight New Zealand universities has shown that success in academia depends on a trio of inter-related factors:**

- institutional support
- prior experiences, and
- the personal characteristics of the academics themselves.

The first two factors are not always within your control, and we have produced two other resources for senior staff and departments to consider how best to provide this input. However, as an autonomous and proactive individual, you can celebrate, nurture, change and develop your personal characteristics.

Successful early career academics share some common traits, and all new and aspiring academics can use the questions in this flyer to consider how they might nurture these characteristics in their own lives.

As well as being knowledgeable and up-to-date on important new developments in their disciplines, successful early career academics:

- are *resourceful* in the ways that they seek support, help, advice and guidance;
- have a strong sense of *relational agency* and have developed broad networks of support;
- demonstrate *resilience* in the face of setbacks and obstacles, rather than being defensive or risk-averse;
- are *respectful*, organisationally aware, astute and committed, and;
- are conscious of balancing work and home life and getting enough *rest and recreation*.

How are *you* doing in the areas of resourcefulness, relational agency, resilience, respectfulness, and rest & recreation? The questions in this flyer are designed to prompt your thinking and encourage you to set goals in each of these areas. You might wish to talk through your responses with a peer, a senior colleague, or your head of department.

# Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness is about being pro-active and not simply waiting for help to come to you. Successful early career academics get out of their offices, ask questions, seek advice, and find their own solutions to problems when they inevitably arise.

- a. What goals have you set or pathways have you decided upon for your academic career? How often do you ask senior colleagues for help with this? How often do you revisit those goals?
- b. How does the promotion process at your university work? What do you personally need to do to get promoted?
- c. What professional and personal development opportunities have you made the most of lately? In research, teaching, leadership, supervision, cultural awareness, work-life balance, and language acquisition, for example.
- d. How familiar are you with the various student services on campus? Do you know any of the people who run these services by name and could you confidently send a student or colleague in need to the right place or person?
- e. Have you published from your PhD and/or do you have a publication plan?
- f. Are you a willing and active member of your department? In what ways?
- g. How are you using social media to support your academic work and/or profile?



## My goals in these areas, and who can help me achieve them

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# Relational Agency

Relational agency is knowing not only that you are able to act to change the world around you, but that the actions you take have an impact on others, for good and ill. It is about knowing how to know whom, as well as knowing what, how and why.

- a. Who are your “academic kindred spirits” – people who think similarly or are doing similar work – and how much contact do you have with them? How could you find more such people?
- b. Who are your mentors, and in what areas of your work (research, teaching, social, cultural, *etc.*)? How do you nurture those relationships?
- c. Who are the top 10 scholars in your field? Do they know you?
- d. What contact do you have with your former graduate supervisor/s and graduate student colleagues?
- e. How many people do you know who could be examiners for your graduate students? Or guest lecturers in your courses?
- f. How often do you see and talk to your departmental colleagues? Do you have morning tea or lunch or social drinks together on a semi-regular basis?
- g. Which individuals or groups have you identified in your local, national and international spheres from whom you might draw professional guidance and support? (*e.g.* unions, professional groups, women’s networks, Special Interest Groups, listservs, *etc.*)



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# Resilience

Resilience is about being able to bounce back from rejection, cope with unexpected events, and respond positively to adversity. Resilience is recognisable in successful early career academics' grit, perseverance, autonomy, self-discipline, and flexibility.

- a. How do you react when you receive evaluations of your teaching from students and colleagues?
- b. What is your response when you receive a "reject" or "revise and resubmit" response from a journal editor?
- c. What different forms of feedback do you seek on your academic work, from whom, and how often?
- d. How often, and from how many different organisations, do you apply for funding or grants to support the work you do?
- e. Who, besides your own students, has seen you teach lately?
- f. With how many people do you share your scholarly work before you present it for publication or performance?
- g. How would you react if one of your PhD students wanted to change supervisors?
- h. Fewer than 10% of academics are successful at securing external research grant funding or gaining a teaching award on their first attempt, and at least one fifth fail to achieve promotion the first time they apply. How will you react if and when one of these rejections happens to you, and to whom will you speak about the next attempt?



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# Respectfulness

Respectfulness is about recognising that the university functions as a collegial enterprise, and requires everyone to serve each other, their disciplines, their students and their community in ways that draw on each other's strengths and compensate for individual weakness. Respecting and serving each other is about being a good academic citizen.

- a. On which university committees or working groups do you currently serve, and which have you identified as important options for the future?
- b. How do you demonstrate care for your students? For your colleagues?
- c. What service activities and/or community-based work do you engage in beyond your institution?
- d. How do you filter information? How do you decide which correspondence is important to read and whose advice is important to take?
- e. How do you react when you are asked to do something you do not want to do at work?
- f. Have you familiarised yourself with your department's and institution's core strategy and policy documents lately?
- g. In what ways are you serving your discipline currently, and how would you like to do so in the future?



## My goals in these areas, and who can help me achieve them

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# Rest and Recreation

Making time and space for rest and recreation helps early career academics to avoid burn-out and deal with stressful situations appropriately.

- a. Do you know how to say “no” when you are asked to take on too much AND how to say “yes” when an important opportunity arises?
- b. How do you protect your family/ personal/leisure time from encroaching work responsibilities?
- c. What exercise and/or hobbies help keep you healthy and sane?
- d. Against whose criteria do you measure your success, and how does this make you feel at work and at home?
- e. What habits (procrastination and perfectionism, for example) prevent you from being productive at work and restful at home?
- f. What organisational tools, routines and practices do you use to help you balance/manage your time effectively?



**My goals in these areas, and who can help me achieve them**

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