

# Academic foundation programmes

## Introduction

Academic foundation programmes are a new initiative as part of the Modernising Medical Careers development. Aimed at junior doctors interested in an academic career, or just in expanding their understanding of research to enhance their clinical work, they provide an opportunity to spend time in research while also achieving foundation competencies.

Most academic placements involve 4 months of protected time out of the foundation 2 year. This can either be integrated throughout the year or can take the form of a stand-alone 4-month placement.

## New skills

Trainees gain exposure to research techniques, literature analysis and statistics. Other more unexpected but equally useful skills that are developed include time management, planning, problem solving and negotiating within a team.

## A new way of working

Academia is amazingly different from clinical work. For the first time on starting a new job I was not thrust into getting to know new patients, new computer systems and a new team. You are given the space and time to think and reflect, and to discover what your interests are. For the most part you are in charge of setting yourself

goals and planning your time. Research requires far more self motivation and planning than I have ever had to call upon in a job before.

After the job I was able to go abroad and present my research at an international conference. Such an exciting opportunity would most likely not have been possible in a traditional post.

## Complementary to clinical work

There can be concern that 4 months out of traditional clinical placements compromises clinical skills. My own experience was that the skills I developed during my research placement have been invaluable in my clinical work, and that the academic placement complemented the other placements. For example, having developed the techniques for appraising literature my day-to-day work is now much more grounded in evidence.

## Finding a project

Some academic jobs are quite prescriptive, but others allow you the flexibility to identify your own interests and design your own study. Finding the right

research project for you can be a challenge. It is important to meet with and speak with lots of people, and to find a mentor who inspires you and who you can work with.

## Time constraints

The temptation is to take on too much, but 4 months is a very short time to complete and write up a study. If your study requires ethics committee approval, gaining this alone can take up the entire placement. Your research should be focused and concise enough that it can be completed in 4 months, but the reality is that many people find themselves still working on and writing up the project after the job has finished.

## Conclusions

I had expected the academic placement to be a relaxed option; in fact it was the most challenging and demanding post of my foundation training. It was also the most rewarding. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

**Dr Catriona Hilton** is ST1 in Psychiatry, St Charles Hospital, London, W10 6DZ

## KEY POINTS

- Academic foundation placements offer an introduction to research.
- The skills you gain can complement and enhance clinical placements.
- It is crucial to choose the right project for you.
- Be realistic about what can be achieved in 4 months.