

# The academic foundation programme: a new foundation for academic medicine

Upon graduation, doctors in the UK embark on a 2-year foundation programme. This comprises a total of six allocated 4-month rotations in different specialities (Kessel et al, 2016). These are designed to provide junior doctors with a variety of different learning experiences for educational purposes and to help in their future career choices.

The academic foundation programme is an extension of the foundation training programme designed to help students experience clinical academia and develop research skills, teaching skills and/or medical leadership skills (Carney et al, 2013). This article provides an overview of the structure of the academic foundation programme, the application process and highlights some of the positives and negatives of the academic foundation programme in order to enable prospective candidates to make informed decisions about whether or not to apply. This article also provides advice on how candidates can maximize their academic experience should they obtain an academic foundation programme post.

## Why was the academic foundation programme created?

Before the implementation of the academic foundation programme, it was identified that there was a significant shortage of clinicians undertaking a career in academic medicine (Margerison and Morley, 2007). A number of

reasons for the failure of academic medicine to attract clinicians have been identified and these have been discussed in-depth elsewhere (Bell and Working Group of Academy of Medical Sciences, 2003). The UK Clinical Research Collaboration identified three major barriers to the pursuit of a clinical–academic pathway (Walport, 2005). These were:

1. A lack of a clear clinical–academic route
2. A lack of flexibility in the balance of clinical and academic training and in geographical mobility
3. A shortage of available posts.

In seeking a practical solution to the problem, a pathway was created for those wishing to pursue an integrated clinical–academic route beginning with the academic foundation programme during foundation programme training. Subsequently, the academic foundation programme is followed by the ‘academic clinical fellowship’ position during specialty training before completion of a doctoral degree. Doctors then progress to become ‘clinical lecturers’, a position which facilitates postdoctoral research. Specifically, the academic foundation programme aims to provide foundation doctors with an opportunity to enhance their skills in academia diverting more doctors down the academic track described. The hope is that this will ultimately result in a higher proportion of senior doctors in academic roles in the future.

Since the introduction of the academic foundation programme in 2006, a limited number of studies has assessed whether or not its creation has led to an increase in the proportion of clinicians pursuing a career in academic medicine. One study by Lyons et al (2010) found that 77% of academic foundation programme trainees wanted to continue a career in academic medicine after completing their academic foundation programme. This study concluded that a well-organized academic programme can assist junior doctors in their pursuit of an academic track while also allowing them to gain the clinical competencies required

of a junior doctor. The beneficial effects of the academic foundation programme in encouraging doctors to undertake a career in medical education research have also been highlighted in semi-structured group discussions with academic foundation programme doctors (Darbyshire and Baker, 2013). While there is still more research to be done in this area, it is encouraging to see that provisional findings have been positive thus far.

## Application process

Applicants eligible to apply for the foundation training programme are also able to apply for the academic foundation programme (Carney et al, 2013). Candidates can apply for a maximum of two academic units of application. These consist of a group of one or more foundation schools designed to process academic foundation programme applications. Upon selection of these academic units of applications, candidates are required to rank their choices of academic programmes within each individual unit. These vary in the composition of their 4-month rotations. Most commonly, these programmes will consist of one 4-month rotation dedicated to research, medical education or medical leadership within the 2-year period, whereas other programmes will have time dedicated to academic medicine throughout the 2 years.

In 2016, a total of 1490 individuals applied for 515 places in the academic foundation programme (UK Foundation Programme Office, 2016a). These figures demonstrate the highly competitive nature of the academic foundation programme application process. Candidates are required to fill in additional sections in conjunction with their foundation programme applications when applying for the academic foundation programme (Carney et al, 2013). These additional sections vary depending on the academic units of application a candidate has applied for but usually they provide room for candidates to demonstrate their further

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achievements such as prizes, publications and presentations. Candidates are also required to fill out 'white box' questions. Again the types of questions asked vary according to the units applied for but generally speaking candidates are asked to highlight their previous experiences and discuss how these have led to their development as a future academic clinician. The answers to these questions are capped at 200 words and this can often be a challenging task for candidates.

Candidates for the foundation programme are given an educational performance measure score based on their performance at medical school and other additional achievements (UK Foundation Programme Office, 2016b). Details can be found on the foundation programme website. The educational performance measure is combined with a candidate's additional achievements and white box questions to form a shortlist for interviews. A candidate's situational judgement test score does not form part of the scoring criteria.

The structure of the interview process varies depending on the academic unit of application applied for. The interviews are designed to test a candidate's clinical acumen and academic rigour. After the interview process, the applicant's pre-interview scores are combined with an assessment of his/her performance at the interview stage. Candidates are then given a total score based on their performance both pre- and post-interview. Those who are successful are offered jobs based on their ranking of individual tracks within the academic units of application.

## Should I apply for the academic foundation programme?

This is a question that medical students will often ask themselves. It can be a very challenging decision for potential candidates to make. The majority of applicants will be final year medical students, many of whom will be undecided about whether or not a clinical-academic pathway is right for them. This article now discusses some of the positives and negatives of the academic foundation programme.

### What are the positives?

The academic foundation programme provides trainees with an opportunity to gain experience of academic medicine. There is often a variety of different projects

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available and trainees are given a large degree of autonomy when deciding on how they would like to further their academic interests. There are often opportunities to get involved in pre-clinical research, clinical research, teaching, quality improvement, leadership and management. Generally speaking the trainee decides on which route he/she takes and this can be very exciting. Many academic foundation programme trainees relish this flexibility and thrive in such an environment.

While the main purpose of the academic foundation programme is for candidates to gain an experience of academic medicine, there are a number of other benefits. Trainees often have multiple opportunities to present their work at conferences and to publish their work. They are also encouraged to engage in teaching programmes. These are all beneficial for future job applications, regardless of whether or not an individual is interested in a career in academic medicine. It is important to state that applying for the academic foundation programme does not commit you to a career in academic medicine. Indeed, that this may explain why there is such a high proportion of academic foundation programme applicants yet low numbers of clinicians in senior academic roles. One can argue that the opportunities presented by the academic foundation programme put those on the programme at an advantage in future job applications.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the academic foundation programme runs in parallel to the foundation programme. Applicants are in no way disadvantaged from their original application by applying to the academic foundation programme. The application process can be a useful learning experience in itself. Candidates are required to collate more evidence than for the foundation programme and this can help students to organize their portfolios and identify any areas that require improvement for future job applications.

Candidates applying for the foundation programme do not have to go through an interview process. While the interview process associated with the academic foundation programme may seem daunting,

it provides applicants with a tremendous learning opportunity to hone their interview skills and this can serve them well in future applications for higher training grades. As such, one could argue that candidates have nothing to lose by applying for the academic foundation programme.

### What are the negatives?

As discussed previously, trainees are given a large degree of autonomy in deciding on their project(s) of interest. While there are positives to this, there are also some pitfalls to be wary of. The lack of a standardized structure means that each academic foundation programme doctor's experience of academic medicine will differ. For an unfortunate few, this can mean that their project(s) never really get started.

Most academic foundation programmes have a 4-month dedicated academic block. In the world of academic medicine, this is a very short period of time. Unexpected problems or delays can occur and this can hinder a trainee's potential to deliver a meaningful project in such a short timeframe. Furthermore, some academic foundation programmes do not offer any protected research time at all within the trainee's programme, resulting in all academic research being self organized and undertaken on top of an already heavy clinical workload.

Another negative to applying for the academic foundation programme is that offers come out before situational judgement test results and before job offers arise from the usual foundation programme application process. As a result, candidates are often faced with the dilemma of having to decide on whether or not to take an academic foundation programme post without knowing what job they would get in an alternative foundation programme post. Often candidates are offered jobs which may not necessarily be their top choice. This can make the decision about whether or not to take the job offer very difficult indeed.

Academic foundation programme is students have significantly reduced clinical exposure over their time dedicated to research. Many trainees often become anxious about

### KEY POINTS

- In recent times, there has been a shortage of clinicians pursuing careers in academia. The academic foundation programme was created as a solution to this problem.
- The academic foundation programme encourages doctors to pursue an integrated clinical–academic career pathway at an early stage in their postgraduate career.
- The academic foundation programme is a highly competitive career track that runs in parallel to the traditional foundation training programme.
- Academic foundation programmes provide foundation trainees with protected time to pursue their academic interests.
- A candidate's choice of topic is broad providing him/her with a large degree of autonomy in deciding on his/her area of interest.

this. An academic foundation doctor still has to achieve the same competencies as a foundation doctor on a traditional training programme. However, he/she has less time to do this and hence it may require harder work clinically to achieve the same standard. This can prove difficult for those on the academic track and again it is something anyone considering applying to the academic foundation programme should contemplate.

### Getting the most out of the academic foundation programme

For those who obtain an academic foundation programme post, it is essential for both the trainee and supervisor to plan early and appropriately before starting the placement. Indeed, it is vital to ensure that project(s)

are achievable within the timeframe. While it may be tempting to opt for a large project with exciting potential implications, both the trainee and supervisor should be cautious about overloading the trainee with projects better suited for doctoral research. As such it is advisable to consider smaller projects in view of the 4-month timeframe. These can include case reports, audits, quality improvement projects or undertaking research that is part of another doctoral researcher's work.

Early contact between the trainee and supervisor is key, ensuring that everything is in place to allow project(s) to be commenced either before or at the beginning of the placement. Clinical responsibilities permitting, developing a clear protocol before the placement means that both trainees and supervisors can highlight and address any potential pitfalls or practical limitations in advance. For instance, if ethics approval is required, this can then be sought several months earlier. Throughout the placement itself, trainees and supervisors may wish to consider creating a timeline of aims and objectives to enable progress to be tracked longitudinally over the time period. This can ensure that outputs are maximized during the academic foundation programme thereby benefiting all the parties involved.

### Conclusions

The academic foundation programme is an alternative career path for prospective foundation doctors with an interest in academic medicine. This article provides an overview of the development of the academic foundation programme and its reasoning, and describes the application process. There are a number of positives and negatives to the programme. These are important for any candidate to consider when deciding on whether or not to pursue a career in academic

medicine. An integrated clinical–academic pathway may not be for everyone but for those who do wish to pursue it, it can be extremely rewarding. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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