

Making the right education choices for career progression

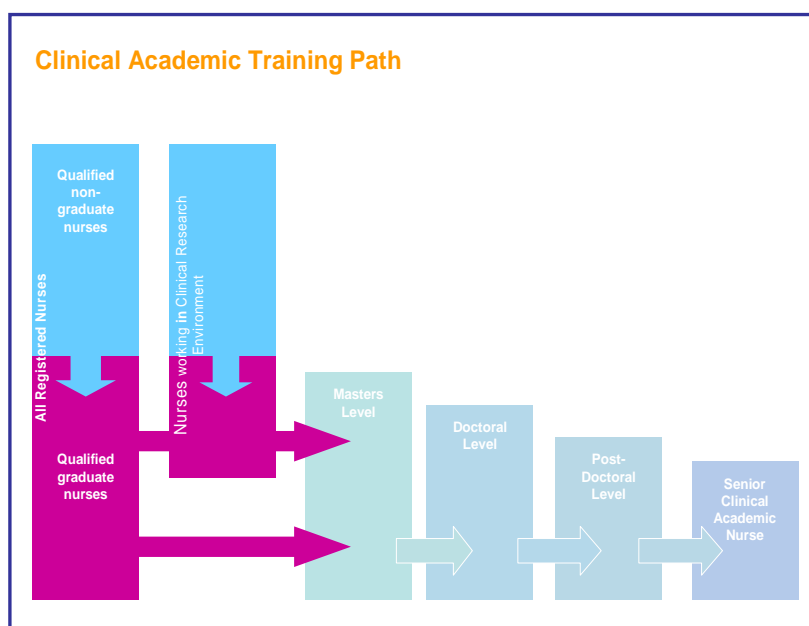
In the UK in 2006, the Modernising Nursing Careers initiative was launched with the aim of addressing the future career pathways for healthcare professionals. The drive for the initiative came from the profound changes in the healthcare services.

“Nursing is changing almost as rapidly as the context in which it is practised. As a dynamic profession, nursing is responsive and is adapting to meet the needs of patients and the public. Across the United Kingdom nurses have taken on new roles, work across boundaries, and are setting up new services to meet patients’ needs. Now is the time to take stock, consider what these changes mean for nursing careers, and ensure that nursing is fit for the future”(Modernising Nursing Careers 2006: 6).

“We need to make sure that nurses have a career structure which enables them to work in different care settings, to take on changed roles and responsibilities, develop a varied mix of skills, to pursue education and training when they need it, and to develop both generalist and specialist skills as they require them” (Modernising Nursing Careers 2006: 14).

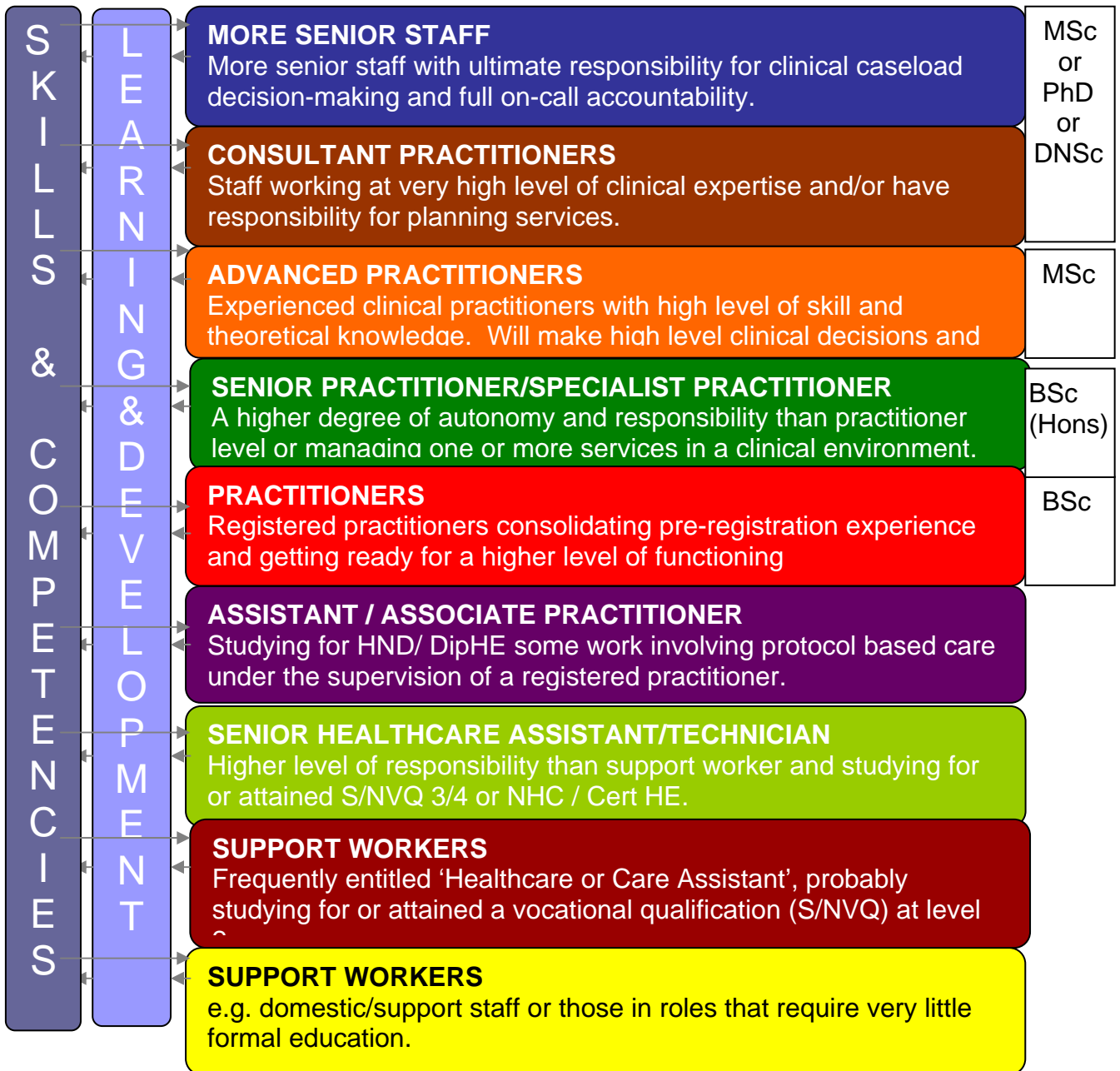
The diagram below provides an example of a Clinical Academic Training Path. As you can see there is a clear progression from undergraduate level up to and beyond doctoral level. Diagram 2 (overleaf) provides an example of the mapping of academic award to clinical posts within a career framework.

Diagram 1: Clinical Academic Training Path



Draft Report of the UKCRC Sub Committee for Nurses in Clinical Research (Workforce)

Diagram 2 Example Career Framework



(Adapted from Scottish Executive Health Department 2006)

Career planning and development is an integral part of being a professional nurse. How many of us actually plan our career progression? A good number of us probably leave it to chance and just let things evolve either through necessity or by taking the opportunities as and when they arise. If we were all very smart, we would start to plan our career progression from the time of nearing completion of our pre-registration programme.

Career planning should be a continuous process and linked to our on-going professional development (Donner & Wheeler 2001). It certainly should not be a one off exercise. Some individuals view career planning as something that their line manager should be facilitating. Whilst your line manager should demonstrate interest in your career aspirations, the bottom line is that it is your responsibility to manage your own career planning and development.

This means that you have to regularly stop, reflect and take stock. There is a piece of wisdom that says – *'If you don't know where you are going, any bus will do'*. The same is true of your career. If you don't plan on where you would like to be in one year, three years, five years or even ten years time, how will you achieve your career aspirations? You may suddenly realise one day that you have been stuck in a rut and have wasted valuable time and opportunities.

Managing your career progression brings different rewards. It may be that as a result of your planning you are able to apply for a more senior position or perhaps as a result of some new learning, your personal and job satisfaction and motivation improves.

So how do you go about your career planning? Organise some time when you are unlikely to be disturbed and think and reflect your way through the following questions:

- Where am I now?
- Am I happy / content with where I am?
- Where do I want to be in 1 year's time? 3 year's time? 5 year's time?
- What do I need to do to get to where I want to be? In other words, what are my learning needs?

Not surprisingly some people find answering these questions difficult. If you feel like this, why not discuss your career aspirations with you manager; a trusted colleague; a friend; or your personal tutor from you last training/education programme? They may be able to help you channel your thoughts and energies.

There are a variety of career pathways you could consider:

- Clinical practice
- Management
- Education
- Research
- Advanced practice
- Consultant

Each of these pathways require you to plan ahead so as to attain your goal. They all require some form of additional education. The more you develop your knowledge and skills set, the greater the choice you will have to maximise the use of any opportunities as they arise.

Let's think hypothetically for a while. Imagine you want to develop your career and remain in clinical practice. Perhaps you want to work in or lead a nurse led clinic or become an advanced practitioner. You will need to explore what education courses are available to you. You should choose something that relates to your area of clinical practice but that perhaps also has some general options so that if you wanted to change direction in the future you would be able to do so more easily. The level of courses that you would need to be exploring would be at Master's level.

Postgraduate level is important as by completing studies at this level you will be able to work at a higher level within your workplace. Characteristics of Master's level graduates include the ability to:

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively
- make sound judgements
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems
- act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks
- exercise their initiative and personal responsibility
- make decisions in complex and un-predicable situations
- strive to maintain their professional knowledge and skills through continuing professional development (QAA 2001).

In a recent retrospective study by Green et al. (2007) of postgraduate physiotherapists (n=48) the influence of having attained a MSc on their role was explored through a survey and focus groups. Some of the results are tabled below:

Table 1: Influence of the MSc on the participant's current role: contributing factors and changes (n= number of responses)

Contributing factors to current role	Perceived positive changes to role
Improved confidence in self and confidence in practice (24)	Involvement in teaching (14)
Eligible for current role (23)	Development of their own clinical reasoning and the ability to facilitate clinical reasoning of others (12)
Updating clinical skills (20)	Advanced clinical skills (11)
Improving clinical reasoning (15)	Ability to undertake research (9)
Greater depth of knowledge (13)	Enhanced professional profile (9)
Ability to evaluate research and apply evidence based practice (12)	
Being able to teach others (12)	

The above findings mirror those found by Whyte et al. (2000) in their 10 year follow-up study of postgraduate nurses.

Perhaps your career aspirations are in management. You would need to think about what type of management; management generally or in a specific area? If you were thinking about general management then a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) may be appropriate. However if you wanted to have management skills related to a particular clinical setting, you may wish to consider a Masters in Healthcare Management.

Education is an area where you can make a decision to continue to stay in practice and work in practice development or choose to work in as an academic or indeed a mixture of the two. What is important to consider here is the need to undertake a course that develops you both professionally at master's level as well providing you with a recognised recordable teaching qualification. At Napier we run a variety of such courses:

MSc Nursing	MSc Nursing & Applied Education
MSc Midwifery	MSc Midwifery & Applied Education
MSc Palliative Care	MSc Palliative Care & Applied Education
MSc Critical Care	MSc Critical Care & Applied Education
MSc Peri-operative Practice	MSc Peri-operative Practice & Applied Education
MSc Intellectual Disabilities	MSc Intellectual Disabilities & Applied Education
MSc Diabetes Management	MSc Interprofessional Practice & Applied Education
MSc Child Protection (Subject to validation)	MSc Mental Health Practice (Subject to validation)

If your career aspirations are that of becoming a Nurse/Midwife/Allied Healthcare Professional Consultant then again you need to think about master's level study or even doctoral studies. As a consultant the core role functions are expert practice; professional leadership and consultancy; education training and development; practice and service development, research and evaluation. The programmes cited above would provide an opportunity to develop all the skills required to meet these core role functions.

You may be thinking about research as a career. Again you can choose to remain in clinical practice or work in an academic institution. If you wish to remain in clinical practice and have a research career you could think about applying for a student scholarship; a Master's degree where you will acquire appropriate research skills and knowledge or you may even wish to consider a professional or clinical doctorate. If you are thinking more of an academic career you may like to consider undertaking a PhD.

A professional or clinical doctorate has a significant portion of the award that is taught as well as having a research component. The taught competent is in a field of professional discipline, for example, Nursing, Midwifery, Clinical Psychology, or Education.

The typical characteristics of those educated to doctoral level are the ability to:

- make informed judgements on complex issues, often in the absence of complete data
- undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level
- contribute substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches
- largely autonomous in complex and unpredictable situations (QAA 2001)

It is therefore important that you not only think about career planning but also how you are going to achieve what you want to achieve. Forbes et al (2006) advocate developing a learning plan which helps to identify your learning needs; how you can meet those learning needs and then evaluate your plan to ensure that your learning needs have indeed been met.

Developing such a learning plan should allow you to focus on essential and desirable elements so that you can make an informed choice about which option to take to ensure you reach the destination you have planned. Using the previous analogy – you want to make sure you are on the right bus!

Undertaking professional development through additional courses requires commitment and investment: the investment of time and money and often the commitment of your family and friends to help support you through the process. So you need to make the right choice. Any learning should be purposeful; targeted; effective and build upon your previous knowledge and skills. It also needs to be delivered in such a way as to suit your learning style and also fit in with your professional and personal commitments. Online and blended learning is becoming increasingly popular as it allows you to study at a place, pace and time that suits you rather than having to attend evening classes or study days.

Now that you have read this article, make a date in your diary for some ring-fenced time with a cup of coffee, notebook and pen to start planning your career!

'You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore'
(Anon).

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