

Chapter 2 Securing a position

He manga wai koia kia kore e whitikia.

Is a river never to be crossed?

- What are tertiary institutions looking for?
- How can you position yourself to be considered for an academic position?
- What is a typical recruitment process for an early career academic?
- How do you apply for an early career academic position?
- What happens in a typical appointment process?
- Does everyone have an equal chance?

What are tertiary institutions looking for?

Despite romantic notions of academics sweeping through hallowed halls wearing their gowns in a Harry Potter-like scenario, academia today has a fairly consistent set of entry requirements and position expectations that are far more mundane—and a daily routine that often includes more bureaucracy than intellectual excitement.

A typical job advertisement for a new academic will ask for:

- appropriate qualifications—these could be both academic and professional
- relevant experience in the field—either as a practitioner or at the tertiary level
- evidence of researching, writing, presenting and publishing in the field
- knowledge of the disciplinary base for that field

- possible experience at tertiary level as a tutor, marker, lecturer or supervisor
- possible success in writing or winning research grants.

As an academic head or manager, I would also be interested in:

- personal qualities—self-motivation, commitment, perseverance, openness
- fit with the team—what experiences and skills complement or add to those of the existing team; will the applicant fit with our ways of working?
- appropriate cultural awareness or a willingness to learn
- willingness to contribute to the wider role of an academic—sitting on committees, mentoring others or engaging with the wider community.

An appointments committee will be made up of representatives who cover a range of institutional and departmental interests. Some of these interests are quite pragmatic; others are more strategic. They might have in mind the following questions:

- In what ways does the applicant contribute to diversity or equity goals of the institution?
- What potential does the candidate bring to enhancing the reputation of the institution through grants or awards?
- How will the applicant fare on research assessment exercises, such as PBRF?
- What evidence is there of knowledge of and commitment to the institution's vision or values, such as commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi?

How can you position yourself to be considered for an academic position?

A person doesn't wake up one morning and say to themselves, "I'm going to be an academic." It is usually a gradual realisation after completing a higher degree or engaging with a tertiary institution through research or practice. Several members of my Emerging Scholars Forum are experienced practitioners completing doctorates or on secondment from their permanent positions to undertake some tertiary level

teaching or programme co-ordination. Their interest in moving into academia has evolved over time.

The first foray into academic life beyond your own study often comes when you are asked to undertake marking or become a teaching or research assistant. Some institutions call for expressions of interest from their students; in other institutions people just seem to be shoulder-tapped. In some disciplines, it is an expectation that masters students will mark essays or tutor undergraduates. In other disciplines, it seems to be a closed shop. When new academics ask me for advice on how to get noticed in order to secure a longer-term position when they are already in an institution, I offer several pieces of advice:

Get known

- Without being pushy, introduce yourself to those around you, attend meetings and seminars, eat your lunch in the common room and show an interest in others.

Offer to help out

- Put your hand up for marking or tutoring, join a committee or working party as a student representative, offer to give a guest lecture, take your turn to empty the dishwasher or engage in other collegial actions.

Establish your credibility

- Offer to hold a research seminar, get to know colleagues working in your field and gently let them know what you do in this area, make a copy of your publications available through the departmental bulletin board.

“It was a natural progression from my teaching. I was a drama teacher. I wanted to know why this happened and why that happened. That led me to do research. After my masters I went back into schools and that made me want even more to bridge the practice-theory divide. Teachers in classrooms are doing wonderful things that no one knows about. I wanted share what they did and apply theory to it.” (CC, early career academic)

“Get to know people. Surprisingly basic, but at the same time there’s a wide range of people to get to know—the subject-area librarian, other library staff, the support staff for your department, colleagues inside and outside the department, senior administrators and deans, research administrators, security guards, catering staff ... anyone you see, really.” (LG, early career academic)⁴

What is a typical recruitment process for an early career academic?

Recruitment and appointments processes vary markedly across institutions so it is hard to discuss a typical process or give a definitive timeline. In general, however, a head of department or programme leader identifies a gap that needs to be filled. They then consider the bigger picture. Have the needs of the department changed? Is it important to achieve a more diverse workforce? Does this area need new leadership? Is it better as a part-time position because of fluctuating enrolments?

A job description will be drawn up and a case prepared to begin the formal recruitment and appointments process. At this point, the academic manager might look around to see if this position could be filled by existing staff or someone on a short-term contract. If the position is small or short-term, it might follow a less formal process—and this is where being known might count in your favour. You will still need to provide a copy of your curriculum vitae (CV) and go through eligibility and verification checks but it might be a small introduction to the permanent appointment you are seeking. Several emerging scholars in my school have begun their careers as Graduate Teaching Assistants, Research Fellows or Lecturers on short-term contracts.

If the position is deemed to be significant or permanent, then it will follow a more formal process. The position will be advertised on the institution's website and possibly through recruitment agencies. There will be a more general advertisement accompanied by a full job description and details of someone to contact for more information.

Take the opportunity to find out more about the institution, faculty or programme. Use your networks. Ask academics you know about the institution and its expectations. Check out the institution's website. Get a feel for their vision, their values and their culture. If the institution's status matters to you, check out the various international ranking lists.

Get to know who works there. I was once asked in an interview who at that institution I admired and would want to work with. I was left scrambling for names—so it does help to get

“Prior to the interview I reviewed the university profiles to find out more about the academics on the interview panel. I arrived early and had a walk around the campus to get a sense of the place. I met with a friend who works there who explained about the university's new focus.”
(CC, early career academic)

familiar with the place and who is there. If, finally, you think the job is for you, get your CV up to date and start putting together an application.

What is expected in an application for an early career academic position?

An application will generally include a covering letter, a completed application form, a CV (sometimes called a resumé), and names of confidential referees.

A covering letter highlights the particular position you are interested in and introduces who you are and where you are in your career now. It then briefly outlines why you consider yourself the right person for this position. It might also indicate your best contact details or periods of unavailability. Tailor your letter to match that position. Generic applications addressed to ‘Dear Sir/Madam’ at ‘Your esteemed university’ don’t give a sense that you are genuinely interested in a position at that institution.

The next section will be an application form in which you detail how you meet the position criteria. If it is an electronic form, you have no choice but to complete the individual boxes in the order they are set out. If you are sending in a written application, you can tailor it to make it easy for the appointments committee to judge your qualities and experience against the position criteria. Don’t make the committee go searching through pages of material to find important information. Here are my tips for making your application stand out:

- Read the job description thoroughly. Address the different expectations in your application. Use headings if you can, rather than big blocks of text. Use the language that they use without it appearing forced or insincere.
- Provide succinct and concrete evidence of your experience or aptitude to support your claims (dates, duration, roles undertaken or recognition given).
- Keep your language formal without being detached. Keep the committee’s interest with sentences that get to the point rather than going off on tangents. Avoid over-enthusiasm or flattery.
- Proofread. Check the spelling of all important names. Get someone to read over your application and ask for critical feedback on content and style.

If you are attaching your CV, make sure it is up-to-date, organised with most recent information first (such as prior positions, qualifications or publications), neatly formatted, easy to follow and relevant—we don't really need to know about your school holiday job as a checkout operator or that you enjoy knitting—unless these details are making a significant point about your suitability for this position.

"Your CV gets you to an interview. The interview gets you the job. Tailor each step to fit the position you are applying for. Ask someone else to look at your application. It needs to stand out from the pack." (KF, senior academic)

Finally, you will be asked to provide the names of confidential referees. Institutions prefer to have a confidential discussion with referees so that they can get a frank opinion of your suitability for the position. Written testimonials as part of your application or CV carry very little weight. Choose your referees carefully. Ask them ahead of time. Make sure that they know you and the key aspects of the position well enough to make useful comments about your suitability. Avoid possible conflicts of interest. Referees' comments will always remain confidential. Even if you later ask for feedback on the appointments process, you will be unable to access your referees' comments.

What happens in a typical appointment process?

You send your application in by the due date and wait. The applications will be collated and processed. If there are numerous applications they will be put through a filtering process to weed out those that don't meet the threshold for consideration. A committee might then review those that make the long list against the criteria for the position. The long list will be reduced to a short list. Those on the short list will be invited to an interview. There might also be an expectation that candidates complete a task such as presenting a research seminar, undertaking a socio-metric assessment or teaching a class. You will be given adequate time to prepare if that is the case.

The interview is the chance for you to build on what is in your application. Don't just answer the questions. Use the opportunity to engage with the panel. Use the 'state and expand' technique. By this I mean give a statement that answers the question and then expand with a concrete example:

Question: Have you conducted research in which you have had a leading role?

Possible answer: [State]. “Yes, first, when I undertook my PhD and, second, when I was the co-investigator on a university-school partnership project.” [Expand]. “I learned different things about leading a project from each of these experiences. With my PhD, I had more responsibility for the decision-making but I had to learn from my mistakes as I went along. In the second piece of research, I was able to share these experiences and bounce ideas off my co-researcher as the research progressed. One example was ...”

You might also be asked a behavioural interview question (“tell me about a time when ...”), designed to get you to explain, with a real-life example, how you have acted in a particular situation. It helps to think of some of these ahead of time:

- Can you describe a time when you faced a challenge in your work? What was it and how did you deal with it?
- Can you describe a time when you successfully achieved a goal and outline for us what the key strategies were that led to your success?

The interview usually concludes with the interview chair asking if there is anything else you’d like to add. There might also be an opportunity for you to ask a question. Again, it helps to think of something ahead of time. For the ‘anything to add’ question, you might like to reiterate why you think you are a good fit for this position and the key attributes you bring. For the second question you might like to ask a fairly innocuous question about induction programmes or new initiatives the institution has in the pipeline. It is not the time to ask about salary. Ask about the salary range in your preliminary investigations on the position and bargain for your actual salary after you are offered the position and are at the stage of negotiating the terms and conditions.

“I was quite well-prepared. I had an idea of the types of questions that they might ask. I had mapped out what I would say in answer to questions like: ‘Why are you applying for this job?’; ‘Where do you see your research going in the future?’; or ‘Tell us about your teaching philosophy.’ I knew I would be quite nervous so I wanted to be well-rehearsed. A colleague told me to focus on three things I wanted to get across. That was good advice for me because I can get off track. My question for them at the end was to ask about room for growth and how I could contribute to course development.” (CC, early career academic)

Does everyone have an equal chance?

It seems an appropriate place to talk about the lack of diversity in academic appointments in New Zealand. One example is that, despite gender equity policies, only 20% of full professors are women. If you are also of Māori or Pacific Island heritage, the journey to appointment, promotion and recognition is even harder. Academic institutions, wānanga aside, appear to be hardwired to do things as they have always been done and the glass ceilings are very real. For new academic staff it is important that you seek out willing mentors from amongst those who have made their way through the gender, sexuality, ableist or cultural roadblocks so that they can support you to do the same.

If any of my senior colleagues are reading this book, it is also important that you nurture the next generation of academics so we can have genuine diversity in the academic landscape.

“One thing I have noticed is the small number of Pasifika academics represented in higher education. These were my own observations as a Pasifika undergrad and postgrad student. However, now as a Pasifika lecturer it is about understanding the wider context of higher education and research. I am more aware of the underlying political tensions. Networking with other Pasifika academics has helped immensely, working collectively to make our presence known in the university.” (JaM, early career academic)