

Book Review



The Academic's Support Kit

Rebecca Boden, Debbie Epstein and Jane Kenway
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Review by Karl R. Wall

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Embarking, by whatever route, upon an academic career means different things to different people: the transition from the Doctoral years through the post-doctoral; the first lectureship, perhaps by way of research assistantships and research officer posts can be brief...or protracted. The intervals between appointments may reflect the different durations of projects, the vagaries of research grants and what is available at a particular moment in a person's career. There are nonetheless, for those working in a University setting, a number of key experiences that in the aggregate, over time, begin to fill out and inform the profile of an academic career path.

An academic career necessarily involves a lot of writing, in different forms, for different audiences as the researcher's work is brought to the attention of the academic community, the practitioner community and others through the dissemination of research findings. In seeking to research further, funding needs to be obtained. This may come about through grant competitions and through involvement in existing research, which leads to additional research. Through these activities networks of contacts develop and, as a researcher's work becomes known so these networks expand. In parallel, to a lesser or greater extent, will be an increasing role in teaching, initially at undergraduate and masters level, but with experience thorough into the supervision of doctoral candidates and then post doctoral researchers. Managing projects of increasing size and complexity also becomes a more prominent activity.

Ordinarily one would need to turn to a variety of sources of advice and information about each of these stages. The accumulated experience of colleagues, mentors and past supervisors, all make an important contribution. It is useful, however, to go to such enquiries with a background ready prepared. Where then to go for such a background?

One source conveniently packaged, as a boxed set, is 'ASK- Academic's Support Kit' published by Sage Publications. Presented in a neat plastic box, it is a compendium of advice, experience and knowledge presented as a series of six inter-connected but free-standing paperback books.

'Building your career', the opening title (although each may be read separately and be dipped into repeatedly out of sequence) focuses on the nature of the decision to become an academic. It examines in turn, the different facets of the academic life. How, for example, one should present one's work and oneself as a developing academic and the complex business of finding and sustaining academic jobs whilst also getting oneself 'known'.

A second volume, 'Getting started on research' focuses on research as an activity involving a number of stages. Beginning with developing research ideas, it moves on to the research process itself. Doing research as an activity is considered next as is how to move on from one research activity to another.

Not surprisingly, a third volume moves on to discussing the process of *writing* research (Writing for Publication). This volume starts with the writing process and moves on to examine the nature of academic publishing and academic journal publishing in particular. It takes in writing in other forms such as chapter and book writing as well as wider forms of writing aimed at broader dissemination purposes.

The fourth volume takes as its focus another aspect of the developing academics role, that of teaching and supervision. In a series of sections, the authors take the reader through the teacher-student relationship, in their different forms and how they might be managed in relation to other commitments. The chapter looks at the notion of pedagogy in the context of advanced academic teaching. This is informed by a consideration of teacher identities and how these play out in the process of supervision and then other forms of teacher-student oversight.

Returning to a research informed theme, the fifth volume in the series focuses on 'Winning and managing research funding'. Sensibly this volume first discusses the pressure that exists around obtaining funding before taking the reader through pointers for getting to know how particular funding sources and agencies 'work'. A following section sets out the key components of any research proposal and offers practical advice on how to present research ideas in a form likely to be taken seriously by a funding body. The chapter moves from an overview of the issues to an increasingly detailed account, including practical points about staff and project management.

A final volume ('Building Networks') focuses on networking and how to build links to contacts in academic, stakeholder and dissemination networks. Here, as elsewhere in the series of volumes, the ethical dimension is identified - an increasingly important aspect of modern academic activity.

In the forgoing I have presented the volumes as though they were a linear series for the sake of reporting them in this review. They are not so numbered in reality. Each stands and works very effectively on its own. The triumvirate of authors involved in each volume: Rebecca Boden, Debbie Epstein and Jane Kenway (here presented in alphabetical order) changes in the order of their identification in each volume, presumably reflecting a differing lead contribution to each volume. As a team they have achieved remarkable coherence and consistency of expression across the different volumes. The international contexts in which the authors work or have worked and the breadth and range of their accumulated experience, shines through in the practical and timely points made through out the volumes.

From the opening paragraphs of this review it will be apparent that the volume titles and their content helpfully address the diverse range of issues that a developing academic experiences or will need to engage with. The multivolume format permits movement backwards and forwards through these issues as particular issues occur, recur or need to be referred back to or, in anticipation, referred forward to, as part of a planned response to a next career step.

This flexibility is also supported by a consistent underlying format and organisation across the different volumes. This is apparent in the many helpful 'case studies' or points for reflection in greyed out text. In addition, the many pauses for reflection are helpful. The key questions asked of the reader, which are supported by succinct and pertinent comments, not

only offer models of how others have dealt with issues, but also offer insights into the range of strategies that might be employed.

No one approach is favoured over another, sensibly reflecting the very different contexts users of the volumes will be working in – contexts that will themselves change as the user's career develops. Few assumptions are made about the readers accessing these volumes other than the belief that those with experience have a responsibility to pass that experience on to others following similar (but never the same) paths as themselves. This the authors, across the volumes, manage to do, using humour, a wealth of practical and pithy detail and an emphasis on the reader's need to reflect on their own experiences in relation to their developing career and to learn from those experiences as much as they learn from the experience of others.

The ASK Box would be a useful addition to the bookshelves of any research group or teaching team with new and developing researchers. It would be helpful for any Department wanting to support its members in the development of their careers. It would also be useful for any senior institutional manager (who may have been an academic themselves) as a reminder of what they as established academics may have forgotten - the complex, competitive and increasingly tortuous process of becoming an academic. For individual readers facing the prospect of a relatively expensive purchase the 'ask' box should be looked upon as an investment: one that will be returned to in its usefulness and thus may pay repeated dividends for the reader.