



Career story: Educational journey



Degree:

Bachelor of Health Science
Bachelor of Food and Nutrition (Honours)
Master of Dietetics
PhD. Thesis: Supporting diabetes management in young adults during life transitions using mHealth

Completion year: 2018

Years since graduation: 2

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Ashley's story

Ashley graduated in 2018 with a PhD focussed on mobile health to support young adults living with diabetes. Her career direction was influenced by a love for human biology, but it was shaped by her experience of living with diabetes and the desire to create a voice for young people living with the condition. Ashley's career story illustrates how career decision making can be prompted by the most unexpected things. She recalls:

During high school I loved learning about the human body. Above anything else I loved learning why people behaved the way they did.

I had no idea what I wanted to do after high school so I kept my options broad and open. I found myself in a double degree doing Health Science and Arts with the intention of majoring in nutrition and psychology.

In my second year of university I was diagnosed with diabetes. As I tried to navigate the healthcare system I realised that I couldn't manage a life with diabetes using only my "textbook" knowledge; there was still so much to learn and adjust to, and so much was unknown.

Based on my experiences I started a blog called [bittersweet diagnosis](#). The blog was a way for me to debrief and reflect on this massive transition. At the same time I searched for online communities through which I could learn more about living with diabetes. Through my blog and peer support efforts I gained the confidence to advocate for myself.

The frustrating thing was the effort, knowledge, persistence and resilience it took to find a healthcare team that was right for me! From this point on I knew that I wanted to change the healthcare system so that no one else had to fight this hard to be heard. To achieve my goal I decided to become a healthcare professional: specifically, a dietitian.

I was studying to become a dietitian when in my Honours year I developed a taste for research. My honours supervisor became (and remains) a mentor. When I presented him a business idea that I hoped would better support young adults with diabetes, he encouraged me to pursue further research; that was how my PhD project started to form.

Managing the transition from dietetics to research

“I have come to realise the importance of having a digital profile, of networking, and of being well-rounded.”

Transitioning from being a dietitian to researcher was initially a bit of a shock to the system. It took me a while to settle, find my feet and realise that a PhD is a marathon and not a sprint - I was so used to pushing myself to the very edge because I knew my Master's degree was a short-term commitment compared to a research career.

Going through the dietetics course was one of the toughest things I have ever done academically. The pressure was immense and I was always under the pump and very stressed. I think that towards the end of the course I was itching to start my research. Being embedded within the healthcare system during my honours and master's studies opened my eyes to all the potential changes that could be made to improve patient experiences and the healthcare system. It frustrated me to be stuck in a position where I could not influence change (especially as a student!) and I knew that research was a way to change that.

I wasn't the healthiest physically or mentally during that time and it's a lesson I'm still trying to navigate - especially since the work never ends when you are an academic! You don't learn life skills such as work-life balance, resilience strategies and stress from textbooks and yet these are the skills that help you to get ahead in the workplace and build a sustainable career.

In 2018 I graduated from my PhD with a thesis focussed on the use of mobile health to support young adults with diabetes during life transitions. I was incredibly lucky to have supportive supervisors who are now my mentors, friends and research collaborators.

Getting ahead as a graduate

Throughout my PhD, my supervisors encouraged and supported me in my diabetes advocacy work. From a blog and small peer support group my diabetes advocacy has now expanded to incorporate international roles and an ever-broadening network around the globe.

Within these advocacy networks are leaders in diabetes healthcare and research whom I would not have met through my PhD alone. Through this experience I have come to realise the importance of having a digital profile, of networking, and of being well-rounded.

As a lecturer I now find myself emphasising the importance of developing networks time and time again. To get ahead you need to find mentors, speak to people in industry and do things outside of classes. Whether you engage in paid or volunteer work, the skills you learn and networks you develop can make all the difference down the track.

Visioning a future career

If you had asked me what I had hope to achieve during my career a few years ago, I would have said that I would like to establish a world-leading diabetes centre in Australia which focuses on research, clinical care and support for those impacted by diabetes. However, I now know that this may not be realistic!

Now, I hope for Australia's healthcare system to recognise the importance of peer support as a critical part of chronic disease management. I also want to make an impact on the students we teach and to help them recognise and understand the impact they can make in our world. I think that many people see themselves only as individuals, but every drop creates a ripple effect and it's important to remember the impact we can have in collaboration with others.

Honestly, I have no idea what to focus on next! I have had some fantastic opportunities come my way and I am working very hard at seeking out others. Something a mentor once said to me is to work with people you get along with and enjoy working with. I think that this is very important in both paid and voluntary work.

I have also spent the last decade or so planning things, so I think for the next few years I'm trying to "ride the waves" a bit and just enjoy where I am. Of course, the research grant writing and paper churning will never stop. At the same time, though, I'm keeping my options open. My worst fear would be to be in a stagnant position where I'm not growing, learning or being challenged. So whether that remains in research, academia or elsewhere, I'm keeping my options open!

Advocacy work

I am the executive director and co-founder of a group called [Beta Change](#), a team of like-minded people from around the world who aim to support and empower diabetes advocates.

Diabetes advocates are researchers, people with diabetes, carers, industry partners or clinicians who are doing their best to improve the lives of people with diabetes. Beta Change provides a platform for advocates to share their work and meet others who may be doing similar things in different countries. We're only in our third year but we hope to establish a global mentoring network and even have a face to face event one day. Read the stories of our diabetes advocates [here](#).

Resources for people with diabetes

In addition to the resources at Beta Change there are many online resources to support people with diabetes, including podcasts, websites and Facebook groups. It's all about finding that works for you! Some good starting points for resources are listed below.

Beyond Type 1 (www.beyondtype1.org)

Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (www.jdrf.org.au)

Your local diabetes organisations. You can find these by asking your healthcare professionals and by searching online for national and regional initiatives. In Australia, for example, [Diabetes Australia](#) is a great place to start.



Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?