




# LAND OF THE CURIOUS



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# Building Academic Career Success

*From PhD to Postdoc and Beyond*

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Najmul Islam

**Education:**

PhD, Information Systems, University of Turku, Finland 2012

MSc, Communications Engineering, Tampere University of Technology, Finland 2008

**Research Interests:**

Responsible information systems design and Use, Blockchain, Explainable AI

**Projects in last 5 years:**

AI4Work (Horizon Europe), LUT PI

Di4SPDS (Chist-era Europe/RCF), Consortium PI

COSMIC (Horizon Europe), LUT PI

AI4MultiGIS (Chist-Era Europe/RCF), LUT PI

SafeRecords: GDPR Compliant Blockchain based Certificates Verification Platform (Business Finland), PI

GDPR Compliant Blockchain Service Design and Value Creation (Business Finland), PI

AI Governance and Auditing (Business Finland), WP Lead on behalf of UTU

Professor Najmul Islam's publication has appeared in IS outlets such as Journal of Strategic Information Systems, European Journal of Information Systems, Decision Support Systems and Information Systems Journal. He has published in other highly ranked interdisciplinary journals such as Journal of Business Research, Computers & Education, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, International Journal of Information Management, Information Technology & People, Computers in Human Behaviour, Computers in Industry, Internet Research, Communications of the AIS, among others.

Senior Editor for Information Technology & People journal.

IRIS (Scandinavian chapter of AIS) board member, Incoming President in August 2026.

Finnish IS scientist of the year in 2022.

LUT Foundation award winner 2024.


# Agenda

- What is academic success?
- What can you do at different stages of your career for success?
  - PhD years
  - Postdoc years
  - Tenure track professor years
- Building on rejections
  - A self-reflection

# Disclaimer

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- Everything I share today comes from my own experiences—others may have very different journeys.
- This talk reflects what I've learned along the way, not a universal blueprint.



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*“People may fail in academia not because they lack intelligence or anything else, most struggle perhaps because the rules of the game is not understood early enough”*

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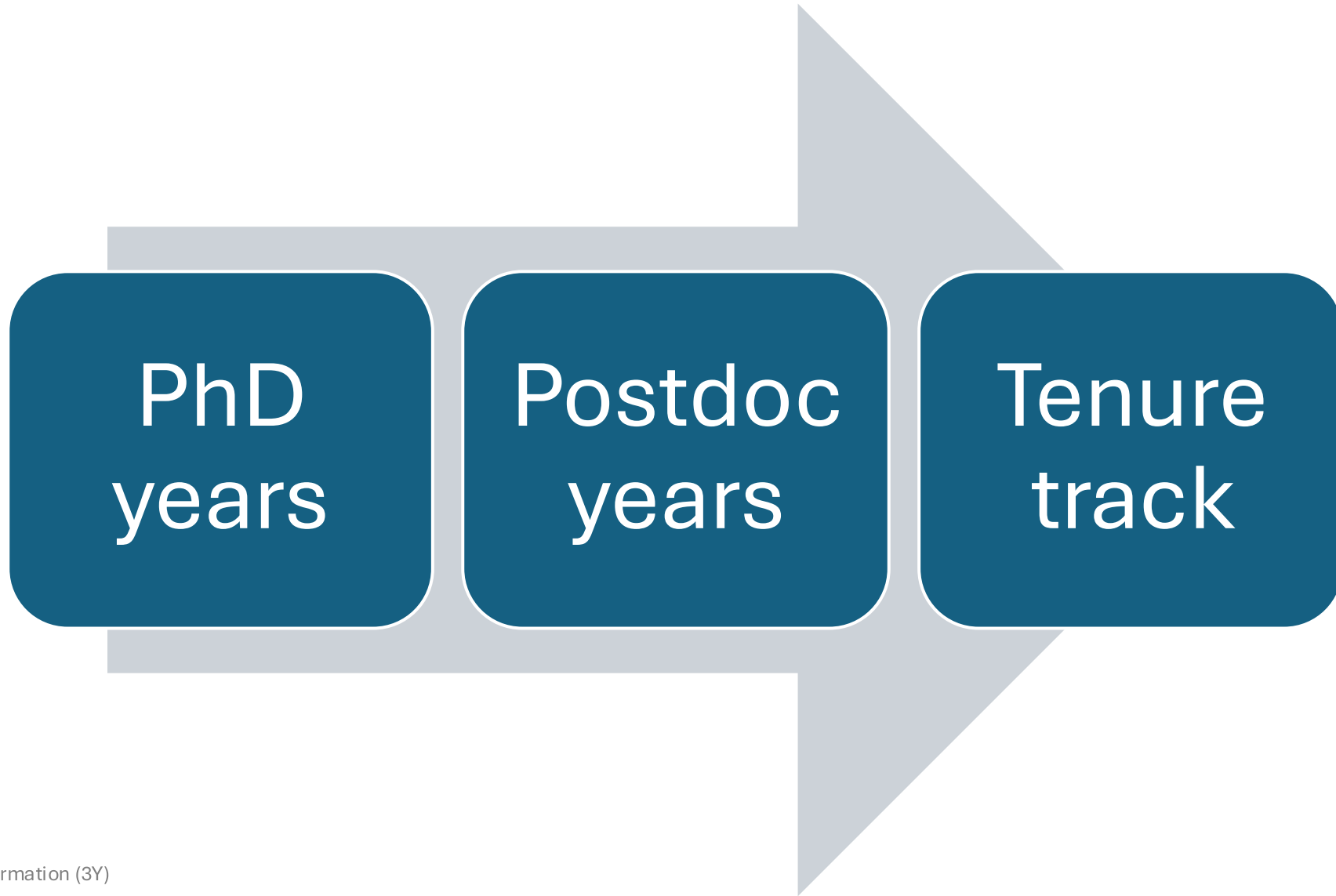
# Some common assumptions

- Publications are enough
- Hard work would lead to success
  - Knowing the rules of the game and being strategic is important
- Career paths are linear and predictable
  - X years of postdoc does not guarantee progression
  - Timeframes for progression are unknown in reality

# What is academic success?

- Activities in all fronts, not just papers
  - Research, publications, funding, teaching, service to the community.
- Career sustainability
  - Long game, early success does not guarantee continued success
- Professional recognition
  - Trusted as an expert among peers and society
- Ability to shape your own research agenda/program
- Personal wellbeing
  - Pre-requisite for the long game

# How should you act at different stages?



# PhD years

- 4 years or 3 years
  - If you can do it faster, and move to next level
- Work under the guidance of your supervisor
  - But try to be as independent as possible
  - Take initiatives, develop ideas/plans by yourself.
- Read a lot, but write at the same time
  - If you are reading a paper, summarize it in writing
  - Writing is a thinking tool
- Improve communication skills
  - Be prepared to tailor it based on the audience
- Attend conferences/seminars
  - Present your work
  - Be ready to talk about your work in informal setting
  - Network

# PhD years

- Look for research buddies
  - If possible start collaborating already during PhD
- Apply for grants
  - Apply for grants from foundations
  - Join your supervisor if he/she is applying for projects
- Teach
  - TA duties if possible
  - Guest lecture in courses
- Develop your research identity
  - In which field you belong to
  - What is your research program
  - Who are the known scholars in your area and what are they writing

# PhD years

- Avoid Social comparison
  - Avoid it
  - If you do it then think how you can improve
- Don't think about problems and complain but think of solutions
  - Supervisor is busy
  - Little help from supervisor
  - Talk to supervisor, maybe a co-supervisor can be assigned
  - Maybe someone else in the lab (or even outside of the lab) can give some guidance?
- Don't be stuck for long time, seek help
  - Ask supervisor or colleague
- Focus on your well-being

# Postdoc years

- This is more challenging time
- Better if you move out of the university from where you did your PhD
  - Brings new opportunities, new network
- Independent research
  - You should have papers without your supervisor
  - Lead author publications
- Stronger collaboration with the research buddies
  - Materialize the connections you developed
- Publish in quality outlets
  - Focus more on quality
  - Make a publication pipeline (I call it pipelooop!)

# Postdoc years

- Teach
  - Responsible teacher
  - Pay attention to the course feedback
- Get formal pedagogical training
  - Your university most likely provides such training
- Establish your research identity
  - In which field you belong to (your home discipline)
  - What is your research program
  - Who are the known scholars in your area and what are they writing

# Postdoc years

- Prepare your application materials for future positions
  - CV, publication list, teaching portfolio, vision statement
  - Preparing these documents need time and iterative process
- Apply for positions (e.g., tenure track)
  - Very long and rigorous recruitment process
  - If you apply, only then you know what is needed
  - You get experience even if you are not selected, and one day you will be selected
- Apply for grants, deeply familiarize yourself with different funding instruments
  - Foundations
  - Try joining consortium for example in Horizon, Business Finland, etc.
  - Do you need to recalibrate your research focus?

# Postdoc years

- Research visit
  - Plan well before the actual visit
  - Establish long term connection and continue collaboration
  - Foundations grant money for such visits or university might have money for such visits.
- Supervise theses works
- Continue attending conferences and network
  - Review
  - AE/PC member role if possible

# Tenure track years

- Continue with your established research program
  - Work on topics that align with your program
- Build your research group
  - Some universities may give you starting package to start a group
- Must apply for external funding
  - RCF, EU, BF projects
  - Some foundations provide money for research groups.
- Mentor others toward success
  - PhD students, postdocs
- Leadership and Management training

# Tenure track years

- Journal editorial role
  - Guest editor, AE, etc.
- Teach, monitor feedback and improve your teaching
- Curricula/program development
- Various administrative tasks
- Continue attending conferences and network
  - AE/PC member role if possible

# Building on rejections

A self reflection

“Your CV shows your successes; your career is shaped by how you handle rejection.”

# Types of Rejections

- Rejections
  - Publications
  - Grant Applications
  - Postions

# Publications Rejections

- 2010-2012 (PhD years) – Happy time
  - Was working alone, single authored papers, not much supervision
  - Targetted only JUF01 level outlets (but only IS outlets)
  - Not so much rejection surprisingly!
- 2013-2019 (Postdoc/senior researcher years) – Frustrating time
  - Started to target a little higher (JUF0 2-3), Especially IS basket level
  - Many failures
  - Papers written in 2014, ultimately published in 2019 after failing many times.
  - Took approaches such as networked with leading scholars, got some support. But wasn't just enough!
  - But learnt a LOT

# Publications Rejections

- 2020-Present (tenure track and professor years)
  - Understand what the EiC is looking for
    - Avoid desk rejection; Still many rejected
  - Understanding what reviewers want
    - Still gets rejected

# Grant Applications Rejections

- 2010-2012 (PhD years) - Frustrating
  - Applied to many foundations with limited success
  - Only 1 success in HPY (Elisa) foundation of 4k euros
- 2013-2019 (Postdoc/senior researcher years) – Extremely Frustrating
  - Many applications to foundations with limited success
  - LSR gave some 7k (possibly)
  - 35k or so to visit abroad
    - It was excellent for visiting UBC, Canada
  - Department did not have enough projects
  - Had contract extension of even for 1 month
    - Ultimately got a permanent researcher position at UTU computing in 2018

# Grant Applications Rejections

- 2020-Present (Professor time) – Success
  - Understood the funding instruments well
  - Increased connections with the industry to score BF projects
  - Repositioned my research to make it more valuable to the industry
    - Carefully chose topic

# Positions Rejections

- Postdoc rejections
  - Can't even tell how many
- Tenure track rejections
  - Norway, Sweden, Finland, Newzealand, US, UK, and what not
  - In most cases not even short listed
  - In 3-4 cases ranked number 2, too close but still too far.
- But from each case, I learnt what they are looking for and what I am lacking
  - How to tackle interview questions, how to give teaching demo
  - Professorship is not just about publications, rather you need to be to some extent ALL ROUNDER, strategic, and visionary.

# Final Remarks

“An academic career isn’t built by chance, it’s built by choices made early, often quietly, and repeatedly.”

