

# Effects of Self-Concept, Discipline, and Institutional Context on Academics' Professional Identities at a South African University

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## Abstract

*This study investigates how academics' self-concept, disciplinary background, and institutional context shape their professional identities at a South African university. This qualitative case study research conducted semi-structured interviews with eight university lecturers. The academics were chosen using convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness to share their experiences. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and themes related to the academics' professional identities. The reciprocal determinism theory framed the study. The study found that a positive self-concept, including confidence, motivation, and engagement, encourages academics to pursue their professional roles ambitiously, while self-doubt hinders professional growth. It also found that meeting disciplinary and institutional expectations, such as administrative workload, H-Index publication pressure, and adapting to new technologies, creates tension as academics balance multiple responsibilities while striving to meet institutional standards. These factors interact to shape how academics see and fulfil their professional roles. The study emphasises the importance of creating supportive institutional environments that recognise and address the various factors influencing academics' professional identities. By promoting a positive work environment, fair compensation, and professional development opportunities, institutions can improve the work-life quality and commitment of academic staff, ultimately contributing to the development of their professional identities.*

**Keywords:** *Academics, Professional Identities, Self-Concept, Institutional Context, Disciplinary Affiliation.*

## Introduction

It is essential to explore how academics' self-concept, their chosen discipline, and work context impact their professional identities. This is because academics have conventionally viewed themselves as part of a self-governing community where they enjoy a significant level of autonomy in their professional trajectory, which may align with the notion of an “ivory tower”, wherein academics chase knowledge perhaps for its sake and operate within a comparatively decentralised academic environment. However, Leisyte and Dee (2012) postulate that academics' conventional self-concept is shifting. Instead of academics viewing themselves as members of a self-governing community, they are seen as knowledge workers with the sole responsibility of engaging in knowledge production, distribution, and application (Leisyte & Dee, 2012). Academics' professional identity construction starts with individuals' self-concept, and how they perceive themselves plays a pivotal role in shaping their professional identity in their disciplinary field within the academic setting. Given the growing trend of studies on academics' professional identity development in teaching, research, and service to the community (Schamp, 2018; Folabit, 2022; Folabit et al., 2023a, 2023b), there is a need to focus research on the implication of academics' self-concept, disciplinary field, and contextual environment on these identities. Although these three pillars (teaching, research, and service) represent academics' performance indicator areas (Wolff et al., 2024), academics' identity is a continuous process of interpreting and reinterpreting experiences that do not address one's current identity but one's desired future self (Clarke et al., 2013). This is because academics' identities can be seen as the way individuals perceive and define themselves within their disciplinary field and the academic context. Again, academics' sense of belonging to a particular academic community of practice that incorporates values, beliefs, and practices associated with their roles as teachers, researchers, and scholars (Esnard et al., 2017; Drennan et al., 2020; Folabit et al., 2023a) can be influenced by individual self-concept, discipline, and the broader contextual environment, which is a focal point of this scholarly interest and investigation (Esnard et al., 2017; Drennan et al., 2020).

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Existing scholarly literature has emphasised the dearth of research on academics' professional identities in higher education (Drennan et al., 2020; Esnard et al., 2017), as well as the scarcity of studies on how academics' self-concept, discipline, and context influence their professional identities in the context of South Africa. An academic's self-concept is central to their professional identity, shaped by their disciplinary affiliation and contextual factors. Previous studies have shown that professional identity evolves within a relational framework, influenced by subject-specific factors (Ching, 2021; Giladi et al., 2022). According to Horton et al. (2014), an individual's identity in academia is rooted in their sense of self, identification with a specific academic discipline and positioning within a broader academic context. This complexity may lead to identity conflicts in the university setting, encompassing clashes between personal values, beliefs, norms, and the demands inherent in an individual's professional identity (Horton et al., 2014).

Given that professional identity in African universities takes on unique dimensions influenced by colonial, historical, and other factors, like the case of the legacy of apartheid in South Africa (Mkhize, 2022; Mokhachane et al., 2023), scholars in these contexts may navigate a landscape formed by a commitment to redress historical imbalances, foster an academic identity that aligns with global standards, and reflect the nation's commitment to inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. This paper aims to advance knowledge and comprehension of the impact of these constructs on academics' professional identity construction. Thus, based on extant research, this study is of the assumption that these constructs, self-concept, discipline, context and professional identity are interrelated to one another as well as influence academics' professional identities.

In this paper, we argue that the relationship between self-concept, discipline, and context significantly influences the diverse professional identities of academics. The purpose of this paper is to examine how academics' professional identities are influenced by their self-concept, discipline, and the context of a South African university. The primary research question addressed in this paper is: What is the implication of self-concept, discipline, and context on academics' professional identities at a South African university? The paper will delve into scholarly research on self-concept, discipline, and context, followed by the research methodology, discussions of the findings, and conclusion.

## Literature Review

### *Self-concept, Discipline and Context*

Wehrle et al. (2018) define self-concept as a dynamic and complex system comprising informed attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgements about oneself. Wehrle et al. emphasise its adaptability and fluidity, shaped by an individual's self-perceptions, experiences, and unique life settings, leading to multiple identities. The development of self-concept is dynamic, as it involves the ongoing interaction between life experiences and one's perception of themselves over time. Chen et al. (2023) argue that an individual's self-concept, influenced by beliefs, values, and experiences, is essential, not just for personal career development. They add that self-concept also influences their performance in various roles, such as teaching, research, and community engagement. This may mean that academics' self-concept is how they approach their role and perceive themselves in their professional responsibilities. However, although academics use their self-concept to evaluate their performance achievements in teaching, research, and community engagement (Wolf et al., 2024), their self-concepts are not solely based on actual achievements in these areas. It can also be influenced by accomplishments in other domains and by comparing themselves to others (Wolf et al., 2024). This study explores the implications of academics' self-concept on their professional identities at a South African university.

Wehrle et al. (2018) introduce the concept of reciprocity between life experiences and self-concepts, indicating that academics not only shape their self-concepts based on experiences but that these self-concepts, in turn, influence and shape future experiences. This bidirectional relationship highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of self-concept, portraying an ongoing process of self-concept construction throughout an academic's life. The characterisation of self-concept as dynamic, context-specific, and reciprocal provides a comprehensive understanding of how academics perceive and define themselves over

time as they construct their professional identities in the university context. This study aims to explore the impact of these various interactions on the construction of academics' professional identities at a South African university in light of this framework.

Bandura (1997) makes a theoretical connection between a strong self-concept and its impact on an individual's ability to foster a sense of belonging, maintain a healthy work-life balance, and navigate the challenges of academia. Understanding this relationship is crucial for promoting academic growth and development. Importantly, self-efficacy influences individual's confidence in their abilities (Bandura, 1997). In the academic context, these traits manifest as confidence in one's abilities, awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and the degree to which an academic feels connected to their field of study. Self-concept, one of the most significant factors determining success, propels individuals who understand their abilities to develop a positive attitude towards them, leading to improved performance and success. The premise is valid for academics and their self-concept (Maksimović & Osmanović, 2019). For example, academics with a strong and positive self-concept are more likely to develop a resilient and dynamic professional identity. This enables them to better address the complexities of academia, foster a sense of belonging, and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Individuals with a negative self-concept, on the other hand, may adopt a low perspective, which may limit their engagement with their professional responsibilities (Usman & Fitrianiingsih, 2020). Concurring, Bentley et al.'s (2019) self-categorisation theory argue that individuals' self-concept is continually shaped and reshaped by their context.

Academic disciplines form the foundation of academics' professional identities. They typically associate themselves with their specific discipline (Bitzer et al., 2016). An academic's chosen field significantly influences their professional identity, defining their expertise and areas of interest and their engagement in the academic community. Discipline has always been an important component of academic work. All disciplines, as part of a broader learning community, have norms, values, and expectations that influence academics' sense of belonging and the nature of their scholarly efforts (Findlow, 2012). Van Dijk et al. (2023) avow that academic subject-area knowledge is an important component of the professional knowledge base for teaching, yet linking this disciplinary expertise to academic professional development poses persistent challenges (van Dijk et al., 2023).

Certain scholars advocate for integrating academic disciplinary knowledge with the development of university teaching skills. However, there are differences among disciplines in promoting the professional development of academic teachers, with fields like medical education taking the lead (van Dijk et al., 2023). The establishment of academic discipline often depends on how disciplinary knowledge helps shape the teaching profession at universities or on the prevailing focus on the teaching-research gap (van Dijk et al., 2023; Musselin & Becque, 2008). Musselin and Becque (2008) further argue that variations in the nature and content of scientific discipline exist across different fields, potentially evolving throughout an academic's career.

The development of a professional identity can be significantly influenced by various factors within the academic context, including institutional norm influences. Academics often juggle conflicting responsibilities, providing high-quality teaching and supervision to an increasing number of students, publishing cutting-edge research in respected journals, obtaining research grants, maintaining managerial and entrepreneurial skills, and meeting tenure-related milestones (Amer et al., 2022; Folabit et al., 2023; Mushemeza, 2016). These contextual pressures can lead to burnout and impact academics' physical and mental well-being, as well as their perceived self-efficacy and responsiveness to students' needs. Consequently, this can reduce the effectiveness of the educational process and students' satisfaction (Amer et al., 2022), ultimately influencing academics at a South African university's professional identities.

Institutions can create strategies based on contextual awareness to build supportive and inclusive environments that foster the development of a strong professional identity among faculty members. Recognising the crucial role of contextual factors is essential for institutions dedicated to nurturing the professional identity of their faculty. A study by Abebe and Assemie (2023) examined the impact of work-life quality on academic staff's commitment to the university and found a strong correlation between compensation and staff commitment, indicating that fair salaries and additional benefits can enhance their

commitment and work-life quality, emphasising the need for a fair compensation system. The study also revealed dissatisfaction among academic staff with the university's working environment, underscoring the importance of a positive work environment in promoting effective job performance. Additionally, the survey found a significant connection between professional development opportunities and work-life quality among university academic staff. Ultimately, academics may not have a satisfactory development of their professional identity if they experience low work-life quality. Therefore, the institutional climate, support structures, and institutional goals have an impact on academics' perceptions of themselves and their roles. Recognising and understanding these contextual factors is crucial for both individual academics and academic institutions.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Albert Bandura's theory of reciprocal determination, also known as continuous reciprocal interaction or triadic reciprocal causation, was used to make sense of this study. The theory posits a triadic or triplex interaction highlighting the connection of environment, persons, and behaviour (Chong et al., 2023; Devi et al., 2017). The environment, which includes both social and physical components, substantially impacts an individual's behaviour. On a personal level (P), the study of human behaviour entails investigating internal variables such as beliefs, self-perception, and other motivating forces that are unique to each person. Meanwhile, behavioural characteristics (B) are defined by the knowledge and abilities required for distinct acts. Examining the link between environment and persons reveals a dynamic interaction in which the environment defines and shapes individuals. Furthermore, there is a reciprocal influencing link between behaviour and the environment, with behaviour functioning as a bridge between individuals and their surroundings. These three components—persons, behaviour, and environment—are inextricably linked, influencing and modifying one another in a continuing and dynamic process. In this current study, the theory of reciprocal determinism is used to echo how the triplex interaction of these three components influences academics' professional identities.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design and Methodology*

The researchers framed this study as a qualitative case study to generate data. Qualitative research is a methodology that enables a researcher to utilise specific research techniques, including in-depth interviews, observations, life histories, biographies, and focus-group discussions to explore people's experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). A case study is the exploration of a specific phenomenon through diverse data sources and perspectives, revealing multiple aspects within a real-time context and highlighting the importance of context in understanding the subject (Rashid et al., 2019). It can be case study research, a family, a person, a community, an organisation, or an event (Priya, 2021), and the case being explored is a university in South Africa.

### *Data Collation Technique*

Data collection is a crucial stage in the planning and implementation of a study (Ajewole & Odiabo, 2009). It involves gathering information about a phenomenon and its context using various techniques. Ajewole and Odiabo (2009) note that qualitative research employs flexible methods, such as loosely structured interviews with open-ended questions, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Data in this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight university lecturers (academics) selected through convenience sampling to gain insights into their subjective, disciplinary, and contextual experiences. While acknowledging that this method may not provide a precise representation of the entire population, it was chosen due to participants' easy accessibility, proximity, availability at a given time, and their willingness to participate in the interview (Andrade, 2021; Etikan et al., 2016). The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes.

The research adhered to ethical considerations by ensuring participants' anonymity. This allowed them to leave the study if they felt uncomfortable. They were also given a consent form to read and sign and assured

that the data provided would be utilised to address the research problem. Pseudonyms were also used to ensure the confidentiality of the study. This data set was anchored on one basic question: What are the effects of self-concept, discipline, and context on academics' professional identities? These themes are discussed in the findings and discussion sections of this paper.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was utilised to interpret the participants' experiences. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis involves "systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (p. 57). This method allowed the researchers to make sense of the data on participants' experiences. After collecting and transcribing the interview data, we began the coding process by compiling, organising, and breaking down the data into manageable groupings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). First, we developed an a priori coding scheme based on the literature review (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The data were then read and corrected before being imported into Nvivo. The a priori codes served as parent codes during the initial coding stage, and subsequent child codes were developed. These codes were categorised, and three themes were developed. These themes were then exported into a spreadsheet, with each code aligning with significant pieces of information used in the analysis of this study.

## **Findings**

This study explored the effects of academics' self-concept, discipline, and context on their professional identities. These three components are significant in this study because they inform their interconnectivity's influence on academic and professional identity.

### *The Consistent Claims of the Effects of Self-concept on Professional Identity*

The data analysis reveals the participants' consistent description of the implication of self-concept on professional identities. Being very subjective, self-concept is a dynamic and complex system comprising informed attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgements about oneself (Wehrle et al., 2018). How academics' professional identity is constructed is a function of how they perceive their self-concept. This study's findings showed that academics' professional identities have been influenced by self-concept. Whether these academics are from the same community of practice or not, the way their self-concepts influence their professional identities is experienced from a personal point of view. This is likely because of personal and internal narratives that shape their individual beliefs, values, and experiences, which are essential for personal career development and their performance in various roles (Chen et al., 2023), such as teaching, research, and community engagement. The choices that people make about the present or future of their career are influenced perhaps by their self-concept. For the participants, beliefs about personality, passion for their career, and their responsibility in their workspace affect how they are motivated to succeed. The importance of understanding the implications of self-concept on their professional identities as academics—the perception of themselves serves as the lens through which they assess their abilities and determine how they contribute to the academic knowledge at their university—is shared unanimously among participants. These are some of the responses from the participants regarding the implication of their self-concept on their professional identities:

*Participant 1: My self-concept...it has impacted how I perceive myself as a lecturer, how I conduct research, and how I contribute to knowledge...it is the basis of my professional identity because it defines and shapes my responsibility and objectives within my discipline."*

*Participant 4: "It has influenced the choices I have made throughout my career in academia... in fact, being in the academic field has been influenced internally or from within...I had to choose at one point in my life to either stay in academia or pursue another career but I believe my inner self had a role to play in shaping what I am doing."*

*Participant 6: "...my self-concept has influenced my career trajectory and has guided how I have visualised and navigated my career over the past 10 years. Note that academia is complex, with different roles and responsibilities to engage in. Publication is fundamental, especially in H-index- journals. I am an expert in my domain because I have confidence that*

*I can perform better...within my academic responsibilities. So if I were to not have, let's say I have a self-concept that tells me that I cannot achieve something, of course, it means I doubt myself which may have hindered my professional growth. So more confidence, more growth but self-doubt is dangerous to one's career growth.*

*Participant 3: "... at the beginning of my academic career, it was hard, it was tough because I needed mentorship. I needed mentorship in publication. As a woman, it slowed my career achievement for some time, but then when that mentorship was not forthcoming at that time, I had to develop my confidence, which made me self-confident and determined. This confidence has pushed my abilities to achieve what I am today thanks to my belief in my abilities to excel."*

Participants in this study reported that individuals' self-concept plays a crucial role in their professional identity and career development. The study found that confidence that emerged from a positive self-concept promotes growth and proactive engagement, while self-doubt can hinder their professional identities. Additionally, their internal motivations and self-perceptions influence their career choices and help them overcome challenges to achieve professional success. Some participants noted that their research skills and infrastructure limitations posed challenges to their self-concept. The participants' self-concept is closely tied to research and visibility. As such, anything that challenges it directly affects their research productivity.

University institutions tend to encourage academics to publish in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. However, this is contingent on the allocation of resources for such publications. In the absence of institutional support, academics must seek external grants to fund their work in high-profile journals. Due to limited resources, academics often find themselves competing with colleagues both within and outside their institutions for these grants, which can be challenging and may result in unsuccessful applications. *Participant 5:* stated, "So, initially in my career, I felt like I was competing with colleagues. However, regular self-reflection helped me stay aligned with my aspirations while meeting the demands of my role."

Another participant stated that his self-conception is his ambition to produce sustainable research. He further explained the challenges with publishing in H-Index journals, stating that,

*Participant 8: "My self-ambition in research has influenced my research sustainability. But publishing in H-Index journals is not a walk in the park. That is when we see the distinction between research and teaching or service. In teaching, modules are distributed at the start of the year or semester, but publication in these Journals is unpredictable."*

The excerpt highlights the challenges academics face in sustaining a research career due to the unpredictable nature of publishing in high-impact journals, contrasted with the structured nature of teaching. Some participants mentioned that they preferred teaching over research, although they acknowledge that focusing solely on teaching may hinder their career growth. Participants felt that institutional policies often conflict with their self-concept, which is foundational in shaping their roles as educators and scholars. This self-concept includes values, beliefs, teaching philosophies, and expectations. Across the board, self-concept is central to professional identity, influencing career choices, confidence, and the ability to overcome challenges. Participants felt that confidence and self-belief are vital for career development and professional growth. As such, a positive self-concept fosters proactive engagement and career advancement, while self-doubt hinders professional development.

#### *Discipline and Professional Identity*

Participants noted that discipline influences their professional identity within the academic environment because it is within the academia that they engage with their discipline to balance their responsibilities in teaching, research, and service. In other words, how they manage these three aspects of their academic work within their discipline determines their professional identity. The following participants had this to say:

*Participant 2: "I suppose my discipline only influences my academic professional identity when I am working within academia. So while I am, how I engage my discipline to balance my teaching, research, and service will determine my identity...however if I had a choice I would be a researcher"*

*Participant 7: When you see yourself as a teacher, an effective lecturer, it transforms your approach or method of teaching. Again confidence that you have regarding your research capabilities may truly shape your desire to pursue research more than outreach. What I can say is one's discipline can also influence what identity one wants to develop.*

The professional qualities and behaviours of academics are mostly evident in the context of their specific disciplines, particularly through their research activities. In other words, the traits and skills that define them as professionals are best demonstrated when they conduct research within their field of expertise. The following participants highlighted more:

*Participant 3: "At an individual level...personally, while I teach agricultural economics, I also engage in research that focuses on bridging social science and natural science. This gives me a unique professional perspective which may not be the same with those from natural science whose research may focus solely on botany, soil science, etc. This shows how we shape our professional identity differently. However, in the faculty, we all from the different disciplines are provided with the same opportunities for research and community engagement and it might interest you to know, on further study,"*

*Participant 5: "For research to be valorised, there should be some measure of rigour. In industrial psychology, while I am committed to teaching and preparing students for the job market, I should be able to apply rigour when conducting research. So I teach, conduct research, and consultancy. Unlike clinical psychologists, who deal with diagnosing and treating mental health disorders, in industrial psychology, we apply psychological principles to workplace context mostly focusing on employees' behaviour, productivity, etc..."*

*Participant 7: "I think that...well let me say this, there are distinct identities within any discipline...within the psychology department, there are commonalities in the commitment to teaching designated modules, research, and the understanding of human behaviour, mental health, and other things that inform this discipline. However, the emphasis on clinical psychology versus counselling psychology or child psychology, for example, results in unique professional identities for practitioners within the discipline."*

This means that academics in the psychology discipline may share some core values and principles, but their specific area of focus leads to unique professional identities.

*Participant 7 "My professional identity is intricately tied to the study of linguistics and language practice. For me, having a natural passion for my discipline and an attitude of obligation towards my students is important to me. However, given that there is a shared commonality in my discipline, my interest contributes to diverse professional identities within the discipline. For me my discipline's focus on linguistic diversity has shaped me into a researcher who values research in African linguistics."*

*Participant 3: "As an educator, I view my professional identity through the lens of my teaching philosophy and practices. I am committed to the art and science of teaching, continually refining my pedagogical techniques to enhance student learning. So my identity is shaped by my role as an educators who influence future generations of learners through teaching and supervision."*

The findings have revealed that participants connect their identity to a passion for their disciplines, duty to students and through their teaching philosophy and practices, emphasising a commitment to enhancing pedagogical techniques and shaping future generations through teaching and supervision.

#### *Institutional context and professional identity*

This study found that academics' professional identities are significantly influenced by institutional policies and departmental cultures, which provide a framework for expectations. These expectations primarily pertain to the professional requirements of the academics' responsibilities. For instance, emphasis on research excellence may shape an academic's identity as a prolific researcher. Similarly, a shift in institutional focus towards teaching excellence may also influence academics' perceptions of their role, leading them to adapt strategies that shape their identity as committed providers of quality teaching and learning experiences, research output, supervision, and public service.

Participants in the study argued that a departmental culture that values mentorship may shape identities as supportive mentors, especially for early-career academics who strive to establish themselves in various aspects of their professional identity, particularly in research. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling. However, their insights aligned with existing literature regarding the implications of these components on their professional identity. Two participants from the faculty of education voiced differences in their experiences and expectations at their faculty/department. Although their main duties are teaching, research, and community engagement, they expressed challenges balancing professional growth and administrative and publication demands. This has affected their teaching and research efforts. They also highlighted the challenge they experience in balancing innovation with the stress of adapting to technology policies as a challenge to stability in their professional roles. These participants had the following to say:

*Participant 4: "The support from my faculty in attending conferences and participating in collaborative projects contributes significantly to my professional development. However, the administrative workload requirements and the pressure to publish in high-impact journals can be overwhelming and may divert my focus from teaching and research."*

*Participant 7: "Using technology, balancing technology methodologies, and student engagement have an impact on my professional identity. By pushing me to innovate in my teaching practices. However, the constant need to adapt to technologies can be stressful and affect my sense of stability in my professional role."*

However, the participants claimed that while their department supports research on diverse areas, and research methodologies to gain insight into research problems, they still have to balance these with other activities such as registering and belonging to an accredited professional body. They felt that while it reinforces their identities as versatile academics, some challenges are presented when balancing these responsibilities such as *"being unable to be as efficient and productive as I would have loved to."* Participant 1

The following are some of the sentiments expressed by Participants 3, 8, 6

*Participant 3: "When I apply principles that support my discipline across my professional responsibilities, it reinforces my identity as a versatile academic. As I mentioned earlier, consultancy is part of my identity, and I also need to belong to an accredited body. So, all of these aspects significantly influence my professional identity positively."*

*Participant 8: "My department supports research that encompasses diverse areas, research methodologies, and both pure and applied research to gain insight into various phenomena...While this is rewarding, it also presents a challenge in balancing these projects with the requirement to publish in peer-reviewed journals to meet the department's performance standards. This creates tension in how I perceive my professional responsibilities."*

*Participant 6: "Navigating the administrative requirements for language use and ensuring compliance with policy standards...I sometimes feel restricted and it affects my sense of autonomy as an academic."*

Applying principles across their discipline, belonging to an accredited body, and receiving support and encouragement to engage in diverse research reinforce academics' identity as versatile professionals. However, the challenge lies in juggling multiple projects, meeting publication standards, fulfilling administrative requirements, and adhering to policies, which can sometimes limit their autonomy and affect their professional identity.

## Discussions of Findings

Academic professional identity is a nuanced and multi-layered construct that weaves together an individual's sense of self, their alignment with a specific academic discipline, and their positioning within the broader academic landscape. The study's findings highlighted the significant influence of self-concept on academics' professional identities. Self-concept, a dynamic and complex system of attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgements about oneself, shapes how academics perceive their professional roles (Wehrle et al., 2018). Wehrle et al. (2018) describe self-concept as fluid and adaptable, influenced by an individual's experiences and self-perceptions. This study revealed that self-concept plays a crucial role in shaping participants'



professional identities, particularly in their career trajectories, motivation, and confidence. Participants indicated that possessing a positive and strong self-concept results in increased confidence and proactive involvement in their professional roles, enabling them to pursue ambitious goals, engage with research, and contribute to their respective disciplines.

Conversely, self-doubt can hinder professional growth by undermining confidence and reducing engagement. This supports Bandura's (1997) assertion that self-efficacy, a component of self-concept, is vital for academic success and professional development. Participants noted that their self-concept significantly affects their career choices and resilience in overcoming challenges. Those with a strong, positive self-concept are better equipped to handle the complexities of academia, such as publishing in high-impact journals and managing various responsibilities. This resilience is vital for maintaining a healthy work-life balance and fostering a sense of belonging within the academic community (Maksimović & Osmanović, 2019). It also helps to address challenges like limited resources and competition for research funding, which can impact professional identities. Despite these challenges, participants felt that a strong self-concept enables them to align their aspirations with institutional demands, demonstrating adaptability and perseverance.

The significant role of academic discipline in shaping professional identity was highlighted, as professional qualities and behaviours are most evident within specific disciplines, particularly through research activities. Bitzer et al. (2016) argue that academics typically associate themselves with their core discipline, defining their expertise and areas of interest. This study found that participants' engagement with their discipline to balance responsibilities in teaching, research, and service shows that those with a strong research orientation view their professional identity through their research contributions and scholarly impact. Findlow (2012) supports this perspective, emphasising the importance of disciplinary norms, values, and expectations in shaping professional identities. However, according to participants, discipline-specific challenges, such as the rigour required for publication in high-impact journals influence academics' professional identities. This is consistent with van Dijk et al. (2023), who highlight the challenges of linking disciplinary expertise to academic professional development. As such, academics' professional identities are thus closely tied to their disciplinary field, influencing their teaching philosophies, research focus, and engagement in scholarly activities.

This study's finding also corroborated Leisyte and Dee's (2012) study that argued that the traditional self-concept of academics as autonomous knowledge seekers is shifting towards a more structured role as knowledge workers as institutional context plays a crucial role in shaping academics' professional identities. Institutional policies, departmental cultures, and expectations significantly shape how academics view their roles and responsibilities. According to participants, while contexts that emphasise research excellence lead to identities centred on being prolific researchers, those that focus on teaching quality foster identities centred on delivering high-quality teaching and learning experiences. The study highlights challenges such as administrative workloads, publication pressures, and adapting to new technologies. These demands create tensions as academics balance multiple responsibilities while striving to maintain institutional standards. This contextual pressure appears to impact academics' well-being and professional identity in the study context (Amer et al., 2022).

We argue that the professional identity of participants in this study is shaped by the interaction between self-concept, disciplinary affiliation, and contextual factors (Horton et al., 2014). This aligns with Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism, which emphasises the triadic interaction between environmental, personal, and behavioural factors. In this context, the institutional environment, self-concept, and engagement in teaching, research, and service interact to shape professional identities. This dynamic interaction supports the view that professional identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed based on experiences and self-perceptions (Chong et al., 2023; Devi et al., 2017). This perspective also corresponds with Bentley et al.'s (2019) self-categorization theory, which describes how individuals' self-concept is continually shaped and reshaped by their context.

## Conclusion

This study underscores the complex nature of academic professional identity, illustrating how the interplay between self-concept, disciplinary affiliation, and institutional context influences it. The findings affirm that self-concept—comprising attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgements about oneself—plays a crucial role in shaping academics' professional identities. A positive self-concept enhances confidence, motivation, and engagement, enabling academics to pursue ambitious goals and navigate the challenges of academia effectively. Conversely, self-doubt can undermine professional growth and reduce engagement. The study also highlights the significant influence academic discipline and institutional context have on professional identity. It appears participants' engagement with their discipline and the institutional environment they operate in contribute to the construction and reconstruction of their professional identities. These insights align with theories of reciprocal determinism and self-categorisation. Thus, reinforcing the view that professional identity is an evolving construct influenced by a continuous interaction between personal factors and contextual elements.

At a broader level, the study's findings offer several practical implications for enhancing academic professional identity and well-being. Institutions should consider fostering supportive environments that emphasise both research excellence and teaching quality, balancing these priorities to support diverse aspects of academic roles. Encouraging mentorship and providing resources for professional development can help academics strengthen their self-concept, build resilience, and better manage the demands of their roles. Additionally, institutions should address challenges such as administrative workloads and the pressures of publication by offering structured support systems and reducing unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. By creating environments that recognise and adapt to the dynamic nature of professional identity, institutions can help academics align their aspirations with institutional goals, thereby improving job satisfaction, career development, and overall well-being.

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