Factors Affecting the Talent Development of Early Career Academics

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***Abstract*—** Continuous changes in higher education require academic staff to adapt, maintain, and advance their careers. The main objectives of this research were to explore the perceptions of early career academics of the available career development opportunities, and to investigate the extent to which they are taking responsibility for their own career development through dispositional employability. A mixed-method research approach was followed. The Talent Development Questionnaire and the Dispositional Measure of Employability were distributed among early career academics of selected merged South African higher education institutions (n = 117). Follow-up interviews were conducted with early career academics to validate the quantitative results (N = 23). The results showed that early the career academics experienced role clarity in terms of their development opportunities, that they were able to apply skills learned to their job, and that they could make joint decisions with their managers regarding their career development. These early career academics were able to take care of their own employability by displaying high levels of optimism, career proactivity, openness to change, career resilience, and career motivation.

***Keywords*—** Career development, Dispositional employability, Early career academics, Talent Management

I. Introduction

Massification and globalisation have brought about a changed workplace for South African academics, one in which they have to adapt to new expectations and identities of students [1]. Accordingly, academics need to broaden their portfolio of expertise to adapt, maintain, and advance in their careers, in order to remain relevant and meet broader society's needs [2]. At the same time, higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to institute formal career development opportunities and career-orientated strategic plans to equip academics with the teaching skills to meet the needs of a new generation of students [3]

The career development of academic staff is not without challenges. Garraway [4] found confusion between the purpose of academic staff development and the methods to achieve it. This study further showed that structures, institutions' cultures, and marginalisation may hamper the career development of academic staff. According to Styger, van Vuuren, and Heymans [5], insufficient government funding hampers academic staff's development initiatives significantly. The insufficiency of career- and development opportunities for academic staff has implications for the motivation, commitment, success, and employability of academics, and could ultimately lead to the devaluation of a professoriate [6].

As a result, academics are, in many cases, forced to take control of their own career development in order to remain attractive hires [7]. A study by Hopkins [8] showed that academic staff continuously choose to migrate to HEIs in different countries as part of their career development. Career advancement and the development of the 'new' academic career are thus individually determined, and academics may adopt certain 'dispositions' to enhance their employability.

Dispositional employability refers to psycho-social characteristics (i.e. openness to change, career motivation, career resilience, career proactivity, career optimism, and work identity) that make people employable [9]. An investigation of dispositional employability is imperative where talented individuals are challenged to obtain and retain a desired job [10].

The main objective of the present study was twofold. First, the research aimed to explore the perceptions of early career academics in terms of the available career development opportunities. Second, the study investigated the extent to which early career academics are taking responsibility for their own career development through dispositional employability. The present research was motivated by the fact that little research currently exists on the career development of academics in general [11].

In what follows, the literature review for this research is presented.

II. Literature Review

A. Academic career development in Higher Education

The importance of institutional support in the career development of academics is well documented. A study by Bashir and Long [12] showed that supervisor support for training enhanced the sense of belonging and loyalty of academic staff to HEIs. This research further highlighted the importance of communicating the availability of training and

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in-house training and developing activities to enhance the teaching and research skills of academic staff. A study by Barkhuizen [13] among academics in South African HEIs showed that academics valued opportunities to participate in training courses and joint decision-making in work activities. The study further pointed out the importance of role clarity and expectations for career advancement and development.

Studies have also pointed out the importance of acquiring job-specific skills through career development and the application thereof in the work context. Svetlik and Braček Lalić [14] found that academics from Slovenian public universities valued their involvement in international activities, and that the experience contributed significantly to their professional development and promotion. A study by Frantz, Leach, Pharaoh, Basset, and Roman et al. [15] found that international collaboration not only enhanced the research capacity of academic staff, but also fostered intra- and inter-disciplinary relationships. Ansmann et al. [16] noted the importance of providing effective networking opportunities for early career academics to promote their career development.

Although early career teaching experience is an expectation, great emphasis is placed on developing teaching expertise of academic staff through mandatory continuous professional development [2]. According to Centra (in Stes & van Petegem [17], the focus of instructional development is "to develop faculty members in their role as teachers," while professional development is concerned with career development of the faculty member, and is not limited to teaching, but includes research and social services.

Weimer and Lenze [18] stated that there are two reasons why early career academics are often targeted for instructional development, these being: 1) they have little or no teaching experience, which results in a low teaching quality, and 2) they have not yet been given tenure, which makes it easier to encourage them to engage in instructional development. According to Brew [19] academic development may focus too much on enhancing research, neglecting teaching and learning. Likewise, Essack and Naidoo [20] argued that teaching quality and its indicators are not adequately debated within the higher education sector, despite the importance thereof in producing quality students. This could be the result of a misalignment between the focus of academic staff development and institutional imperatives (Greyling, in Botha & Potgieter, [21]. According to Singh [22], the need for increased postgraduate outputs forces HEIs to focus on research capacity-building in the areas of supervision, publication, and staff qualifications. Research, as a measure of competitiveness and attraction of government funding, is therefore high on the agenda of HEIs [5].

B. Dispositional Employability

Fugate and Kinicki [23] developed the concept of dispositional employability, which denotes a "constellation of individual differences that predispose employees to proactively adapt to their work and career environments." Dispositional employability has been related to several positive work-related outcomes, such as career success, job satisfaction, perceived employability, and reduced turnover intentions [8]; [24]; [25]; [26]; [27]. Dispositional employability consists of six dimensions: openness to change, work- and career proactivity, work- and career resilience, career motivation, optimism, and work identity [23].

Openness to change refers to the extent to which academics are flexible in the work environment and adaptive to continuous learning and meaningful experiences. According to van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Bakker and Schaufeli [28], individuals who are open to new experiences and change tend to be more adaptive to work dynamic requirements, allowing them better manage and deal with stress-related matters. Wolhuter, van der Walt, Higgs, and Higs [29] found that academics did not perceive the ever-changing academic environment as an obstacle. Lichy and Pon [30] found that change initiatives in French HEIs enable academic staff to change their work activities as they wish. Furthermore, the continuous internationalisation of higher education in the 21st century creates opportunities for academic staff to enroll for post-doctorate studies abroad, which, in turn, enhances their tenure and scholarly productivity [31].

Career resilience is the extent to which individuals are optimistic about their career opportunities and work, the extent to which they feel that they have control over the destiny of their careers, and feel that they are able to make a marked contribution through their work [23]. According to Martin and Marsh [32], resilience relates to one's ability to effectively deal with setbacks, stress, and pressure in the academic environment. Martin and Marsh [32] further indicated that resilience comprises self-belief (confidence), a sense of control, low anxiety (composure), and persistence (commitment). A study by Cora-Brumble, Zhang, and Castillo-Page [33] showed that career resilience can enhance the productivity of academic staff. DeCastro, Sambuco, Ubel, Stewart, and Jagsi [34] stated that early career academics need to be career resilient in the face of criticism and rejection by senior academics.

Career motivation in the context of dispositional employability refers to the extent to which academics can make specific career plans and strategies, be in control of their own career management, and set career goals [23]. According to Siddique, Aslam, Khan, and Fatima [35], highly qualified and motivated academics can develop students both personally and professionally. However, they added that such talented and competent staff members are not motivated enough by their supervisors, and that dissatisfaction with their job, the organisation, and management will lead to them leaving. According to Gmelch [36], the higher education system is rich with different interests, goals, priorities, values, needs, and motivational instincts, compared to other organisations. Higher education leaders can therefore use various intrinsic and extrinsic factors to motivate academics to put extra effort into their work.

Work- and career proactivity is a term used to refer to tendencies of individuals to gain information that will potentially affect their jobs and career opportunities, both within and outside of their current place of employment [23]. A study by Said, Rasdi, Samah, Silong, and Sulaiman [37] showed that proactive behaviour has a significant impact on the career success of academic staff when institutional support is available.

Work identity refers to the degree to which individuals can define themselves in terms of their particular organisation, job, profession, or industry [23]. Currently, the work identity of academics is affected by the numerous changes in the higher education environment. The significant decrease in government- and research funding has transformed public universities into 'academic capitalists' who are compelled to generate a third stream of income [38]. This may eventually compromise teaching, research, consultancy skills, or other forms of application of academic knowledge, and lead to a loss of professional autonomy, scholar identity, and psychological ownership [6]. As mentioned by Quigley [39], academic identity lacks precision, because it is influenced by many competing influences. A study by Smit, Crafford, and Schurink [40] found that the activities in which academics engage are of critical importance to their work identity. Nyamupangedengu [41] found that early career academics need to develop a common language to negotiate their space in HEIs.

III. Research Design

A mixed-method research approach was used in the present study. According to Cresswell [42], mixed-method research is rapidly expanding in social and human sciences globally. Onwuegbuzie, Bustamante, and Nelson [43] defined mixed-method research as a process that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a broader and deeper understanding of research. The present study followed a sequential mixed-method design, where quantitative data were gathered first, followed by collection of qualitative data [44].

A. Research Participants

The respondents were academic staff from 11 public HEIs in South Africa. A total of 294 surveys were distributed to a purposive convenience sample of academics. A response rate of 40% (n = 117) was achieved. A total of 51.3% of the sample consisted of women, while male respondents made up 46.2% of the sample. The ethnicity of the sample was divided into 47.9% white, followed by 37.6% black African, 7.7% Indian, and 3.4% Coloured. The age group with the highest number of respondents was 40–49 years (34%), while, on a cumulative basis, 82% of the respondents were older than 40 years. The largest single group of respondents was those in possession of a Master's degree (49.6%), and, combined, 75.4% of the respondents had either a Master's degree or a doctorate. The largest group of respondents was employed on lecturer level (54.7%), followed by senior lecturer level (33.3%). The majority of respondents had 0–5 years' work experience in academia (53%), and had been employed for 0–5 years in their current job (70.9%).

Follow-up interviews were conducted with 23 early career academics from selected HEIs. Most of the participants in were male (N = 15), employed as lecturer (N = 16), in possession of a Master's degree (N = 13), and representative of the black African ethnic group (N = 14).

B. Measuring Instruments

Two measuring instruments were used in the present study: a Talent Development Scale [13] and the Dispositional Measure of Employability [23]. The Talent Development Scale consists of 15 items and measures three dimensions: Skill utilisation, Participation in career decisions, and Role clarity. Responses are measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Never (1) to Always (4). This questionnaire obtained acceptable internal consistencies in the South African context [13].

An adapted version of the Dispositional Measure of Employability, developed by Fugate and Kinicki [23], was used to measure the respondents' orientation towards their work and their employability. The adapted questionnaire consisted of 19 items and measured five dimensions: Openness to change, Career proactivity, Career resilience, Career motivation, and Optimism. Responses were measured on a six-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (6). This questionnaire has been validated in the South African context [24].

Permission for the project was first obtained from the Head of Skills Development of Higher Education South Africa. The questionnaires were distributed in hard copy, via the skills development facilitators, to a convenience sample of academics in the identified HEIs. Permission to use the questionnaires was obtained from the relevant developers, and their use was subjected to an ethical clearance process. Questionnaires were treated anonymously, to protect the identity of the respondents.

C. Data Analyses

Data analyses were carried out with the aid of SPSS software [45]. Exploratory factor analysis was performed to determine the factor structure of the measurements. Cronbach alphas were used to determine the reliability of the questionnaires. A cut-off point of 0.7 was used as a guideline for acceptable reliabilities [46]. Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and cross-tabulations were used, due to the descriptive nature of this study. The quantitative findings of this study were supplemented by verbatim quotes from the participant interviews.

IV. Results And Findings

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) was used. An MSA of 0.780 was obtained for the Talent Development Scale. According to the guidelines, an MSA greater than 0.6 is adequate for factor analysis [47].

Principal components analysis was done of the 15 items of the Talent Development Scale. The initial results showed that three factors could be extracted, based on the eigenvalues. A subsequent principal components analysis was done, using varimax rotation, to specify three factors. Four items were deleted because of problematic loadings. The three factors explained 68.05% of the variance, and were labelled Role clarity (Factor 1), Skill utilisation (Factor 2), and Participation in career decisions (Factor 3).

Principal component analysis was performed on the 19 items of the Dispositional Measure of Employability. The initial results showed that five factors could be extracted, based on the eigenvalues. A subsequent principal components analysis was performed, using varimax rotation, to specify five factors. The five factors explained 67.324% of the variance, and were labelled Optimism (Factor 1), Career proactivity (Factor 2), Openness to change (Factor 3), Career resilience (Factor 4), and Career motivation (Factor 5).

Next, the descriptive statistics and reliabilities of the measurements are reported, in Table 1, below.

TABLE I
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MEASUREMENTS

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Talent development					
Skill utilisation	2.9915	.68065	-.415	-.495	.802
Career decisions	2.9715	.65004	-.389	.339	.749
Role clarity	2.7350	.71415	-.153	-.416	.865
Dispositional employability					
Optimism	4.6560	.89342	-1.457	3.423	.783
Career proactivity	4.8085	.72796	-.906	1.129	.798
Openness to change	5.0235	.60528	-.675	1.283	.811
Career resilience	4.9715	.74481	-1.382	4.185	.718
Career motivation	4.4843	.90813	-.414	-.065	.691

The results in Table 1 show acceptable reliabilities for all the measurements according to the guideline of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Field, 2009). The above results are further explored in the next section and supplemented by verbatim quotes from the participant interviews.

A. Theme: Talent development

From the results, it is evident that early career academics are able to apply their skills in the workplace. They have influence in decisions relating to their careers, and they have role clarity. The interview participants, in particular, highlighted opportunities for rapid progress in academia:

"Rapid progress is very possible without being favoured by your input. So, if you can come and you start as a junior lecturer, within four years, you can become a senior lecturer, which may not be the case if you joined with someone in the public service" (Participant 1, male, senior lecturer, doctorate, black African).

Another participant highlighted the opportunity to apply skills and be creative:

"I think it's really an environment where one can be creative. I consider myself as a creative person. I like to busy myself with the creation of new concepts, new ways of thinking, and new ways of solving problems" (Participant 11, male, lecturer, Master's degree, white).

Other participants, however, highlighted the need to develop certain academic skills further. One participant noted:

"Allow academics to supervise Masters' students, because the more you supervise, you're going to publish articles, and that works towards your growth as an individual in terms of getting promotion" (Participant 12, male, lecturer, Master's degree, black African).

In support, Participant 3 added:

"In some other universities, they have this thing 'work-integrated learning,' where they give you an internship programme for about six months, that you can graduate. I think, if they could also implement that here, it will also give us an opportunity to be able to, not only teach theory to students, but, if we can actually tell them something practical, that would be perfect for us" (Participant 3, junior lecturer, female, honours degree, black African).

B. Theme: Dispositional employability

Generally speaking, the early career academics displayed high levels of dispositional employability. From the mean scores, it was evident that early career academics are optimistic about their careers, which was mentioned by one of the interview participants:

"I love it. I love my job, and not one day I felt like I don't want to do it. I believe that not everything is perfect, you have frustrations, but my major philosophy in life is that you've got a choice how to handle adversities, and I think I'm very resilient, because I'm positive" (Participant 10, female, senior lecturer, doctorate, white).

Another participant added that he was optimistic about the future of academia, and stated:

"*Yes, in the sense that there will be a future in the academic system when the academics take upon themselves the responsibility of improving the school, the purpose, the quality, the visions, and the missions of education"* (Participant 7, male, senior lecturer, doctorate, black African).

The academics in this sample also displayed high levels of career proactivity. One of the participants stated:

"I think it also depends on the career opportunities — what you create for yourself, and I think that is something that's possible in the university — to create career opportunities for yourself. Career opportunities are progressing in terms of lecturing, but are also progressing in terms of research" (Participant 8, female, lecturer, Master's degree, white).

Participants further noted:

"*There are a lot of structures and interventions that is available through the university, so I would like to develop as*

a researcher very strongly. I've got a really clear picture of what it is that I want to do in my research going into the future... You can keep your finger on the pulse, so you can really be up to date with what is happening" (Participant 11, male, lecturer, Master's degree, white);

And

"Well, what I know is, upon joining the university, I realised that measures had been put in place for me to pursue further studies, and those measures are still available, and it is upon individuals to take up the offer available and work" (Participant 1, male, senior lecturer, doctorate, black African).

The results furthermore showed that the respondents displayed high levels of openness to change relating to career exploration and development. One of the interview participants stated:

"At this stage, I don't want to limit myself in terms of fields. I think I'm still young enough, where I think I still need to explore. We have such diverse research fields that I'm still open to change it" (Participant 8, female, lecturer, Master's degree, white).

Another participant highlighted the need for higher education systems to change:

"*Yes, first and foremost, the entire system of education must be fully revisited, because, at the moment, my point of view is that the system has totally collapsed. It must not just be education for the sake of education ... it must be education that is meant to build"* (Participant 7, male, senior lecturer, doctorate, black African).

The respondents also appeared to display career resilience. One of the interview participants stated:

"Specifically, I want to find myself career advancement, and the one that I'm looking for is in the academics. He has to occupy his specific role in the recession under social economic and political environment, and to help also to motivate and supervise under difficult circumstances" (Participant 7, male, senior lecturer, doctorate, black African).

Another participant added:

"One of the biggest problems they may have is the progression on their further studies, and, if there is a delay in acquiring further qualifications, they tend to get frustrated, as they then stagnate in the positions in which they are. Opportunities are there for them to apply for further qualifications and improving their qualifications, and the university made provision for them to work towards senior posts" (Participant 1, senior lecturer, male, doctorate, black African).

The results also showed that the respondents experienced career motivation. One of the participants stated:

"I think the first point is a position where one can develop oneself, because when you come to an environment where we have doctors and professors, it actually motivates you to keep on — I mean inspired by that, and get to the highest level" (Participant 2, lecturer, male, Master's degree, black African).

Another participant, however, cautioned that career advancement can have a negative impact on career motivation, stating:

"The problem is that most of them will compare themselves to others, to their counterpart, to the contemporaries that would have gone in other areas. There are other areas where you can progress very fast, and that can be very frustrating to them" (Participant 1, senior lecturer, male, doctorate, black African).

V. Discussion

The main objectives of this research were to determine, firstly, early career academics' perceptions of career development opportunities in South African HEIs, and, secondly, the extent to which early career academics take responsibility for their own career development through dispositional employability.

The results of the research show that the early career academics experience role clarity in terms of their career development opportunities [12]. The results also indicated that they can make joint decisions relating to their career development opportunities with supervisors, and apply the skills learned on their jobs [13]; [14]. In this context, the HEIs allow early career academics to be creative in their jobs. In line with previous research, the participants also observed that the availability of career development opportunities enables them to progress rapidly in their careers [7]. However, some participants highlighted the need for more development relating to certain functions of the academic profession, such as student supervision. In line with Garraway [3], these findings highlight the need for HEI management to implement programmes to develop the contemporary academic skills required by HEIs. Participants also highlighted the need for further development in teaching skills and the implementation of programmes such as work-integrated learning to enhance the employability of students. In line with the findings of Fahnert [1], it is clear that the participants also recognised the need for teaching excellence in higher education.

The results of this research also show that early career academics take responsibility for their own career development and advancement. The early career academics in this sample generally displayed high levels of optimism, career proactivity, openness to change at work, career resilience, and career motivation. As with previous studies, the respondents showed that they were able to deal with frustration and adversity in the work environment [32]. The participants also believed that they should be proactive and take it upon themselves to improve their work environment and the quality and vision of the institution [35]. In a similar vein, other participants felt that they were responsible for creating their own career, and should use the opportunities that the universities present to advance their teaching and research.

The participants also indicated that they are open to change, and want to use the opportunities brought about by change to advance their careers [29]. Other participants indicated that they were motivated by the fact that the university provided them with opportunities to further their qualifications [33].

The participants, however, did highlight that they feared stagnation after obtaining a qualification. In this context, the availability of post-doctorate studies could be beneficial in enhancing their career success [30]. Participants, however, also raised concerns that the education system is collapsing, and that more emphasis should be placed on practising teaching that builds societies.

VI. Implications

From a practical point of view, this research showed that career development opportunities are available for early career academics. However, there must be a balance the between teaching and research skills development of academics. Furthermore, early career academics require proper career development guidance in an ever-changing higher education environment, to ensure that they remain relevant and employable. Higher education managers are also encouraged to develop a talent culture with more in-house, state-of-the-art career development programmes that will contribute to a pipeline of talented novice scholars. Higher education management should further capitalise on the high levels of dispositional employability of early career academics, and use it as a tool to motivate the self-development of academics, while, at the same time, retaining them.

VII. Limitations and Recommendations

This research had some limitations. First, a cross-sectional research approach was used, which means that perceptions of career development were measured at one point in time. Given the current changing situation of HEIs, these perceptions are likely to change over the long term. Therefore, longitudinal research should be carried out to detect perceived career development opportunities over the long term. Second, this research only focused on early career academics. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to other academic job levels.

For future research, it is recommended that the sample size be expanded to include other academic job levels, to enable a comparative analysis regarding career development opportunities. The research should also be expanded to include higher education management and human resource management departments, to obtain a more holistic perspective on academic career development in HEIs. The results of the present study show that the early career academics were positive about their career development opportunities, and that they displayed high levels of dispositional employability. Future research could benefit from including variables (e.g., management support) that can explain academics' perceptions of career development. Furthermore, future research should also focus on the individual and organisational outcomes of career development opportunities for early career academics.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlighted the importance of career development for early academics in South African HEIs. Although the results are positive, there is a critical need to develop more customised talent development processes and programmes for early career academics, to ensure a future pool of talent scholars who can make a valuable contribution to society through excellence in their teaching and research.

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