

IS IT A JOURNEY WORTH TAKING? EXPERIENCES OF SECOND-CAREER ACADEMICS TRANSITIONING INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The evolving landscape of higher education has witnessed an increasing number of individuals from various professional backgrounds transitioning into academia as second-career academics. This article explores the experiences of such academics, focusing on the motivations, challenges, and rewards associated with this significant career change. Employing a collaborative autoethnography approach, four academics from diverse disciplines and universities in the Western Cape province of South Africa shared their personal narratives. The analysis revealed motivations such as a perceived calling to academia and a desire for career growth. However, they faced challenges such as adapting to new teaching methodologies, managing diverse classrooms, and a lack of institutional support and mentorship. Balancing academic

responsibilities with previous professional identities and handling academic administrative tasks were also significant hurdles. Despite these obstacles, the participants experienced substantial professional development and personal fulfilment. These findings accentuate the critical importance of providing structured support systems, comprehensive induction programmes, and ongoing professional development opportunities to facilitate smoother transitions for second-career academics. In entirety, the cultivation of a reflective academic community, coupled with robust mentorship programmes, can significantly enhance the integration and retention of second career academics within academia.

Key words: Second-career academics, Higher education, Career transition, Professional development, Institutional support, Collaborative autoethnography.

INTRODUCTION

The pathways to becoming an academic are undergoing a significant shift in the constantly changing context of higher education. Historically, academia has often been perceived as a profession initiated early in one's career, entailing a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of teaching and knowledge. However, an increasing number of individuals from diverse professional backgrounds have embarked on second-career transitions into higher education in recent years (Duderstadt 2017). These individuals, referred to as Second-career academics (SCAs), bring a wealth of real-world experience and knowledge from professions outside academia. Early-career academics (ECAs) have been the subject of many educational developers' inquiries (Fitzmaurice 2013; Sutherland 2018; Sutherland and Taylor 2011). However, there is a shortage of studies on SCAs, their transitions, and the experiences they bring. This calls for more research pertaining to SCAs as affirmed by Herman, Jose, Katiya, Kemp, Le Roux, Swart-Jansen van Vuuren and van der Merwe (2021). In support, Zeidan and Bishnoi (2020) emphasise the valuable contributions of SCAs in bridging academia with industry and society, which in turn enriches the educational experience for students.

In this article, we explore the transition of SCAs into institutions of higher learning. We aim to uncover the motives, difficulties, and rewards associated with this significant change in professional trajectory using collaborative autoethnography (co-autoethnography), an approach that encourages personal reflection and storytelling (Warwick, McCray and Palmer 2021). We believe that as a group of four academics who have already embarked on this transformative path, our individual stories offer a unique perspective to examine the broader phenomenon of second-career transitions in academia. Therefore, the goal of this article is to provide a nuanced and personal perspective on our journey of SCAs, shedding light on the factors that influence

our transition into academia and the impact of this transition on our professional lives. To achieve this goal, we pursued the following interrelated objectives:

- To explore the diverse motivations that drove us from various professions to pursue second careers in academia.
- To examine the unique challenges and barriers we face as second-career academics in navigating the academic landscape.
- To document our personal and professional rewards and transformations that accompany the transition into higher education.

By exploring these three objectives, we are of the view that the article will contribute to a broader understanding of second career transitions within academia and their implications for the academic community within South Africa and the global scale. Having set the introduction for the article, the subsequent section outlines who we are and factors surrounding our discoursal-self as SCAs.

CONTEXTUALISATION

“How do we study others without studying ourselves?” (Koch and Harrington 1998, 883). Drawing from these scholars, it is imperative to firstly describe who we are and the contextual factors surrounding our being and discoursal-self in academia. We are a group of SCAs transitioning into higher education, and we are part of NATRC (New Academics’ Transition Regional Colloquium). NATRC is a regional programme that brings together newly appointed academics from universities in the Western Cape Province, South Africa, to help foster a community of practice. NATRC offers a platform for new academics in the region to collectively engage, debate, and discuss the challenges and opportunities they encounter during their transition from practice-based or professional settings to their academic roles at the university, marking their entry into the context of teaching.

For the colloquium, newly appointed academics prepare mini-research presentations identifying and theorising the challenges they encounter as new academics. Academics are then allocated to research groups based on a shared theme of challenges they encounter. Throughout the year, they convene in their cluster groups and participate in writing and reflective activities. A pivotal component of the NATRC colloquium is the composition of reflective research papers intended for publication, within participants’ respective groups. Four academics from two

different universities in our group participated in the writing group using a reflective narrative approach. The fact that we originate from two different institutions of higher education facilitates a diversity of experiences and the exchange of ideas influenced by various factors.

The two universities in the region have distinct characteristics and focus areas. The first university is classified as a traditional university, renowned for its historic roots and excellence in research, particularly in fields such as agriculture, engineering, and business. The second university falls under the category of universities of technology, and as a technology-focused institution, it emphasises practical and vocational training, offering diplomas and degrees in engineering, applied sciences, and technology. Both universities thus cater to different academic and professional needs, contributing uniquely to the region's educational landscape.

It is also important to highlight that the four of us come from different disciplines and hold various positions in our respective universities. For instance, the first author holds an MPhil in Sustainable Development, the second author holds an MEd in Education Leadership and Policy Studies, the third author holds a MSC in Nursing, and the fourth author holds a PhD in Linguistics and Literary Theory. This diversity in our roles and fields of expertise contributes to the uniqueness of our transitioning journeys, as will be elaborated upon in the forthcoming sections. In the subsequent section of this article, we outline our theoretical points of departure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical point of departure, we adopted the personal reflective theory (Schön 2017), which is grounded in a person's appreciation system that is based on beliefs and consists of a repertoire of values, knowledge, theories, and practices. Eliciting personal reflective theory is particularly important for our professional growth as SCAs because the level of consciousness about beliefs influences our disposition to realise change as affirmed by Tovey and Skolits (2022). For example, not understanding the changes we have endured when transitioning into academia may prohibit us from improving where we exhibit weaknesses.

The notion of personal and public theories is influenced by Mason's (2006) description of "inner research" and "outer research". To talk about inner research is to talk about awareness of, and being explicitly articulate about personal and practical sensitivities, experiences, and ideas (personal theories) that may affect our attitudes and identity as SCAs. These sensitivities require "introspection, a metacognitive process of observing oneself from the inside" (Fleur, Bredeweg, and van den Bos 2021, 123). Therefore, this presents a constructive way for us as

academics to maintain a personal awareness and sensitivity through reflecting on our transitioning journey.

In the context of this article, the term reflective practice describes the nexus between reflection and practice, and from this grounding, our practical experience as SCAs becomes a site for learning and unlearning. However, this can only occur if we possess a disposition to be reflective as transitioners. Drawing from Perkins, Jay and Tishman's (1993) "dispositional theory of thinking", as SCAs, we should have the inclination or felt tendency to be reflective about the transition; sensitivity or awareness of a personal stance, and to occasions or opportunities when reflection is warranted; and the ability or know how to follow through with reflection to develop future practice in academia. It is on these grounds that we reflect on our experience of transitioning into academia.

Having presented the theoretical points of departure for the article, the ensuing section presents the methodology adopted.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a collaborative autoethnography methodological approach, which is also known as co-autoethnography (CAE). Autoethnography is a qualitative research form that is aimed at describing personal and cultural experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Merriam and Heuer 1996). When describing experiences of more than one person, it becomes a collaborative autoethnography. We adopted this methodology so that it can enable us to pool our stories, in which we can find commonalities, differences, and meaning within the socio-cultural contexts of being SCAs. We used CAE to write into each other's story and respond with the intention to improve or better understand our own practice as transitioning academics through self-study (Coia and Taylor 2009). As advised by Coia and Taylor (2009), Ellis (2000) and Raab (2013), we weaved our narratives together, mediated through relationships, engaged in critical reflection and collaboration. We met for writing retreats and workshops over a period of two years and six months, with a frequency of three times a year. We engaged both individually and as part of the group.

Collaborative autoethnography follows the confessional narrative tradition of ethnography (Spry 2001; Merriam and Heuer 1996). It is within autoethnography that researchers repositioned themselves as subjects of investigation, writing detailed narratives from an emotional perspective while at the same time, representing specific sociocultural environments based on individual perceptions and experiences (Ellis et al. 2011). Drawing from Cunningham

and Jones (2005), Spry (2001), and Tsai, Choe, Lim, Acorda, Chan, Taylor and Tu (2004), autoethnography provided us with an opportunity to share our voices, thoughts, observations, and perspectives that might not necessarily be heard as well as the insight that could be too elusive to elicit. By adopting a qualitative autoethnography research methodology, we sought to describe and critique our personal beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and values on how we transitioned to becoming early-career academics. This methodology was chosen on the basis that it balances intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion, and creativity.

Data collection and analysis

All four authors participated in data collection, and we used pseudonyms to conceal our identities. We referred to ourselves as participants, designating four participants abbreviated as P1, P2, P3, and P4. It is important to note that the assigned participant number does not correspond to the author number; for instance, data attributed to P1 does not necessarily pertain to Author 1. We ensured that there was no alignment between the order of authors and participant naming to avoid revealing our identities. Each participant undertook to write their personal reflections on their journey of transitioning into academia. We wrote our personal reflections on a piece of paper in one sitting, and over the sittings that came later we engaged and found commonalities and differences in our narratives. The reflections were guided by the following questions:

- What motivated me to pursue a second career in academia?
- What unique challenges and barriers did I face while navigating the academic landscape during my transition?
- How have I personally experienced rewards and transformations in my life, both personally and professionally, as I made the transition into higher education?

The individual reflections were coded. The codes were then categorised, and themes were created from the categories. The completed reflections were analysed using thematic analysis, which is a method used for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought from the institutions where we are employed, even though the data and findings do not explicitly expose any institution. While our co-autoethnography did not necessitate ethics board approval, our reflective approach led to extensive discussions and collaborative decisions concerning relational ethics and our responsibility towards “identifiable others” mentioned in our accounts (Ellis 2000). We also declare that the findings of this article are not the views of our institutions and should therefore not be generalised. They are solely our views as researchers and are open to criticism. We affirm our commitment to adhering to qualitative research review guidelines, assuring the careful consideration of the study’s relevance, the appropriateness of the qualitative methodology, the transparency of our procedures, and the soundness of our interpretations.

The nature of co-autoethnography required us to engage in critical reflection on aspects of our experiences that are often taken for granted (Fourie 2021). This process enabled us to be deliberate in safeguarding the privacy and rights of individuals implicated in our stories (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez 2016). Furthermore, our ethical considerations encompassed the protection of all of us, including deliberations on when and how we would make our autoethnographies publicly accessible (Chang et al. 2016). In brief, our pivotal role in data collection and analysis is acknowledged, with a specific emphasis on transparency and reflexivity to uphold research integrity.

The collaborative nature of co-autoethnography necessitates mutual respect and a commitment to reciprocity among the researchers. As both participants and researchers, we were acutely aware of the power dynamics within the group, ensuring that no individual’s voice was marginalised or overrepresented. Each participant fully comprehended the scope of the research, the way their personal narratives would be utilised, and the potential implications of sharing their experiences publicly. This includes the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. Due to the limitations inherent in the sample, the study refrains from making broad generalisations based on its findings.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Unlike the previous sections of this article, which are presented in a first-person plural narrative, the findings are presented and discussed using a third-person narrative. While the reflective sections benefit from a personal, subjective perspective, allowing the researcher to share insights, experiences, and personal growth, the findings section aims to present data and findings impartially. We are of the view that using a third-person narrative approach in the

findings section will help enhance objectivity by creating a distance between us as the researchers and the data. This will ultimately reduce potential bias and emphasise that the findings are based on empirical evidence rather than our opinions. To conceal our gender identities, we avoided using second-person pronouns (he and she) and instead used third-person pronouns (they and them).

Accordingly, the findings of the study revealed three key themes: motivations to become an academic, challenges and emotions during the transition into academia, and the rewards of this transition. The themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: Motivations to become an academic

Participants cited various motivations for pursuing an academic career. These included a passion for teaching and research, a desire to contribute to knowledge, and the influence of mentors or role models. Understanding these motivations is crucial for developing support systems that nurture aspiring academics. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme: academic calling; previous job experiences fuelling the transition into academia; and the need for career growth and an innovative environment. The sub-themes are discussed below:

Sub-theme 1.1: Academic calling

Some participants felt that their transition into academia was a calling in their lives or a fated event. One participant indicated that it was their dream to be an educator. Many felt that they had a love for teaching and learning, and that they had a passion for their subject content, which they wanted to share with others. Participants also indicated that they derived a feeling of joy from teaching. For instance, **P1** and **P3** echoed:

“I was motivated by a deep passion for my subject area and a desire to make a meaningful contribution to the academic community” (**P1**).

“When working with students, I thrive and feel that on most days I give my best. There is a call that I believe I have heeded. Unlike my previous work (as a former high school teacher) which I believe was bringing me closer to this calling” (**P3**).

Sub-theme 1.2: Previous job experience

Although some participants felt that the transition was a calling, as SCAs, some participants felt that their previous areas of employment fuelled their transition into the academic world.

One participant felt constrained by the bureaucracy at their previous field of employment, and this prompted their move into academia. **P3** echoed the following:

“In my previous employment, I felt constrained by bureaucracy and my perception of antiquated rules. I am not saying that this does not exist in the tertiary sector” (**P3**).

Similarly, **P4** was not stimulated in terms of the knowledge and skills acquired at the previous place of employment. This, together with being denied an opportunity to study further through the previous employer, served as a catalyst that set a ball in motion for the transition into academia.

“I had applied for a postgraduate diploma..... it was my intention to study and work, however my employer at the time was reluctant to send me via study by assignment. After much debating, I had decided to resign to pursue my studies as a specialist” (**P4**).

Sub-theme 1.3: Career growth and innovative working environment

Participants also expressed other needs that prompted their transition into academia. These needs included wanting to make a positive and meaningful contribution to society, wanting to develop their careers and having a desire for more freedom and a space where they can innovate within the teaching and learning arena. **P3** stated:

“The issue was that there was limited scope to be innovative in teaching and learning. Academic freedom was lacking within the curriculum in secondary schools. The answer most cited was, “The Department [of Education] says so”. Academic freedom feels amazing. Being able to decide how to design learning programmes to suit learners’ needs is something I appreciate in the tertiary sector” (**P3**).

To sum up, Theme 1 discussed various motivations for pursuing an academic career. Participants cited a range of motivations for pursuing an academic career. Some participants perceived their move into academia as a calling, driven by a love for teaching and subject content. Others were motivated by frustrations with previous job constraints, seeking greater freedom and professional growth. Additionally, the desire for a more innovative and flexible working environment also played a significant role in their decision to transition into academia. These sub-themes highlight the diverse and deeply personal reasons behind choosing an academic career. The next theme discusses challenges participants experienced when transitioning into academia.

Theme 2: Challenges with transitioning into academia

Participants' transition into academia was fraught with challenges, reflecting a complex and demanding shift. This overarching theme encompasses four sub-themes that encapsulate the difficulties encountered in various aspects of academic life. These sub-themes include challenges within the domains of teaching, learning, and assessment; lack of support; the overwhelming workload; and the intense feelings and emotions experienced during this period of transition. These sub-themes are further discussed below:

Sub-theme 2.1: Challenges within the domains of teaching, learning, and assessment

The domains of teaching, learning, and assessment presented significant hurdles for some of the participants. According to Moges (2018) adapting to new pedagogical approaches, mastering diverse assessment methods, and meeting the high expectations for academic rigour requires substantial effort and adjustment. In support, Moffitt and Bligh (2024), submit that the transition of SCAs does not only necessitate the acquisition of new skills but also a deep rethinking of established practices and assumptions. This is evident in **P3** utterances:

“Having been a high school teacher, I needed to have students physically close by. What I then experienced was talking into an electronic device to an often-inattentive audience” (**P3**).

Similarly, participants experienced challenges in the practical aspect of being an academic. For instance, **P1** felt inadequately prepared to manage diverse classrooms, and needed guidance on setting up assessments and lecture content, as evident below.

“Although I had professional experience, I had little training as a teacher. Significant problems were managing a diverse classroom, creating effective exams, and creating compelling lectures” (**P1**).

Participants also experienced challenges in navigating the teaching and learning software and the policies of the higher education institutions. Being unable to use the software has a direct effect correctly and adequately on your ability to effectively teach and manage your teaching and learning space (www.highspeedtraining.co.uk). Likewise, not being aware of policies,

procedures and guidelines can also be anxiety-provoking and contribute to not being able to effectively manage the teaching and learning arena. **P4** stated:

“At times I felt that the use of technology got the better of me. Applications such as Microsoft Teams, and Zoom were new. Moving onto an online platform and learning how to utilise the Moodle platform presented challenges for teaching and learning. I felt challenged that this created distance between students and myself “(**P4**).

Other challenges that were encountered relate to student-lecturer interaction. One participant felt that being a young academic in a class where the students were older presented a challenge. This finding is supported by Crozier and Woolnough (2020), who state that young academics are often perceived as less experienced compared to their older colleagues, leading to assumptions about their competence or depth of knowledge. In the context of this article, the participant felt that there was less respect shown compared to the older and more seasoned academic. This manifested in the students testing the participant’s knowledge of the subject content, pointing out errors made in class, and making comparisons to another lecturer’s teaching style. The culmination of this behaviour from the students made the participant feel inadequate in the teaching role, which in turn affected the participant’s confidence in their ability to teach. **P4** stated:

“The introductory..... group was quick to point out my errors,,,,,student corrected me for using ‘fiscal’ instead of ‘financial.’ Another student, about 20 years older than me, complained to the course coordinator about my classroom management, citing lateness among students. Additionally, the students compared my teaching style unfavourably to that of the course coordinator.....This comparison undermined my confidence and made me feel disrespected “(**P4**).

Theme 2.2: Lack of support

The lack of support emerged as a critical challenge. Participants reported feeling isolated and inadequately supported by their institutions. This lack of mentorship and guidance often led to a sense of disorientation and uncertainty, exacerbating the difficulties of the transition (Barrett and Brown 2014). All the participants expressed that they had experienced a lack of support with transitioning into academia. **P3** and **P1** echoed the following:

“My concerns were that I had no idea how to conduct research or publish articles. There was no guidance provided in this regard. To an extent, I did not know how to start this process while settling into a new career path” (**P3**).

“As an academic in higher education, you have three roles which are research, learning and teaching, and community engagement. This becomes a huge challenge because in most cases you

do not join existing projects where you will be guided, you are expected to start your own projects and there is a lack of support... I have recently struggled with an unclear process to be followed when applying for things like ethical clearance” (P1).

Participants also expressed a need for mentorship. Participants indicated that they needed guidance on how to navigate the academic world. Mentorship yields invaluable benefits such as knowledge transfer, skills enhancement, career guidance, networking opportunities and research support (www.timeshighereducation.com). A participant also expressed the need for feedback as part of the mentoring process. The feedback was seen to help and guide individuals through their academic journeys. For instance, P2 stated:

“I feel like I needed a mentor to teach me the ways of being an academic and thriving in the academic environment which I was lacking. A big part of why I felt like an imposter was due to a lack of feedback. Whether the feedback was good or bad was not important. The university was a foreign and uncertain environment” (P2).

Theme 2.3: The overwhelming workload

The high workload associated with academic roles added another layer of complexity. Balancing research, teaching responsibilities, administrative tasks, and personal life proved to be an overwhelming challenge for the participants. The intense pressure to publish, secure funding, and excel in teaching often led to burnout and stress (Nendauni 2025; Whitsed, Girardi, Fitzgerald and Williams 2025). All participants echoed that the transition into academia was accompanied by a high workload. The reasons for the high workload were largely due to trying to navigate the new academic life. One reason for the high workload was due to the teaching content not being familiar and having to develop PowerPoint presentations from scratch. Another reason was learning the software that was to be used for teaching and learning activities and becoming acquainted with the academic landscape to effectively function. P4 and P1 expressed the following:

“It was very challenging to start at the university as the workload was a lot to deal with. I was not familiar with the content that I had to teach which meant that I had to spend hours researching. Outside of my very basic understanding of MS word, I also had to learn how to use MS word effectively, PPT, excel, outlook and the university’s online platform. I felt like I was thrown into the water and told to swim” (P4).

“It took some time for me to become knowledgeable about pedagogical practices and student-centred teaching strategies” (P1).

Also, learning the academic space was a time-consuming process. Added to this, the participants also had to fulfil their jobs' responsibilities. This resulted in the academics finding it difficult to find a work-life balance. For instance, **P2** stated:

“Balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities proved to be a juggling act. The demands of academia often felt overwhelming. Finding a harmonious balance became a constant challenge” (**P2**).

Some participants also felt that the workload is prohibiting them from developing themselves. **P4** mentioned there was a delay in obtaining the master's degree due to the high academic workload.

“I was not prepared for the high workload, I was supposed to complete my masters in one year as I had done an honours degree, however, due to the high workload, I spent a lot of time on preparing for my teaching. Most weeks I had worked 5-6 days on the university work instead of the 3 days that I was paid for. As a result, I completed my master's over 2 years instead of 1” (**P4**).

Some participants indicated that there was pressure to publish and that learning to do so was a steep learning curve. While publishing is a crucial aspect of academic life, excessive pressure to publish can have detrimental effects on both individual researchers and the broader academic community (Paruzel-Czachura, Baran and Spendel 2021). The publish or perish aphorism, combined with a high workload, makes it difficult to find time to conduct research and publish. Participants expressed the following:

“The pressure to publish in reputable journals and present at conferences was intense. This aspect of academia demanded a steep learning curve. I had to develop a research agenda, navigate the peer-review process, and build a network within my academic discipline” (**P2**).

“My initial understanding was that I was being employed to teach in the undergraduate programme. My credit load was increasing, and I did not think about the need to conduct research and publish articles. I must admit that I did not hear this from my superiors but more from talking with academics who often cited, “publish or perish” as a university requirement” (**P3**).

Theme 2.4: Feelings and emotions experienced during the transition into academia

The emotional and psychological impact of the transition cannot be understated. The feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and stress experienced by new academics were profound. The emotional toll of adjusting to the demands of academia often leaves individuals feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their future in the field (Dorenkamp and Weiß 2018).

Participants felt that transitioning into academia was a continuous learning process where they had to get used to the academic landscape and learn the language of the academic community. Many participants felt that academia as an institution is a resistant institution as the participants felt they could not contribute to conversations, their opinions were not valued and there was resistance in implementing new ideas. For example, **P4** and **P2** said:

“While engaging with some colleagues in the department, at times I felt that my opinion was not seen as being valuable. Some colleagues were dismissive towards me by disregarding everything that I said.....the experience made me feel that I should not raise my opinion in meetings or when comments are asked for because I didn’t want to feel rejected” (**P4**).

“However, when I am with colleagues who have way more academic credentials than I do, I feel like I cannot contribute to conversations or say, ‘smart things’” (**P2**).

The findings also show that the transition into academia left some participants feeling like impostors. As SCAs, the participants came into higher education with a wealth of knowledge and experience. Despite this knowledge and experience, the participants had to learn the academic culture which spawned the feelings of an impostor. For example, **P3** stated:

“In the first two years of my employment, I did not actually ‘get it’; how we are all connected to the Main Campus. All the new systems or structures contribute to the disconnection I experienced from where I am based and how I link to the faculty. The sense of hierarchy sat somewhere, and I felt I was ‘just a lecturer in an undergraduate programme’. This feeling exacerbated my sense of being an imposter” (**P3**).

Some participants also felt isolated, lonely and disconnected. Participants felt isolated as they were new to academia and could not relate to anyone. The isolation resulted in one academic having insecurities about the job as well as feelings of self-doubt which affects the individual’s confidence. Another participant felt disconnected due to the geographical location of the school. **P3, P4** and **P1** stated:

“During the Covid-19 pandemic.....I felt working in cyberspace was a lonely journey for a new academic. I needed to have moments to work with others in close proximity” (**P3**).

“I felt alone at times because I couldn’t really relate to anyone. This just served to enhance my insecurities and self-doubt as an educator transitioning into academia” (**P4**).

“Being isolated by location and then having to navigate between the different hierarchical structures at the university made my fitting into this new space difficult” (**P1**).

To sum up Theme 2, participants’ transition into academia was marked by a series of interrelated challenges. The difficulties within teaching, learning, and assessment, the lack of

institutional support, the burdensome workload, and the emotional strain all contributed to a complex and demanding transition period. These findings accentuate the need for comprehensive support mechanisms to ease the transition for new academics, promoting a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.

Theme 3: The rewards from transitioning into academia

The final theme that emerged from the data highlights the rewards associated with transitioning into academia. Despite the acknowledged challenges, participants found the journey to be ultimately rewarding. One of the key benefits was the opportunity to build extensive networks through collaboration with colleagues and peers. According to Moffitt and Bligh (2024), a collaborative environment facilitates not only the sharing of knowledge and ideas but also the formation of supportive professional relationships, which are crucial for career development in academia.

Additionally, attending conferences played a significant role in these rewards. Conferences provided a platform for participants to present their research, gain feedback, and stay updated on the latest developments in their fields. These events were instrumental in fostering professional growth and development. By engaging with the broader academic community, participants were able to enhance their skills, gain new perspectives, and increase their visibility within their disciplines (Whitsed et al. 2025). **P4** said:

“I did not have the smoothest transition into academia, but I feel that I am better for it especially in light of the lessons that I learned and the knowledge that I gained. I feel that in the initial transition I lacked confidence, and I had overwhelming need to prove myself which prevented me from wanting to speak up. Now I feel more secure and have more confidence in my abilities and the knowledge and skills I have gained as an educator that I feel more at ease to voice my opinion” (**P4**).

Other rewards experienced were related to the benefits of working at an academic institution such as rebates, being funded for studies and time off to focus on building a research portfolio. For instance, **P2** expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to receive study rebates at regional institutions, which they plan to utilise fully after completing their PhD. Similarly, **P1** highlighted the contrast between their previous experiences of self-funding further education as a schoolteacher and private college lecturer and the substantial support received in public higher education. See their utterances below:

“Rebates to study in regional institutions is also another great opportunity for self-development that I am excited about, and I am looking forward to taking full advantage of this benefit after finishing my PhD project” (**P2**).

“

Developing myself by studying further as a schoolteacher and a private college lecturer was not easy because I had to self-fund my studies. However, ever since I joined public higher education my studies are fully funded, and I am given time off to focus on my studies” (P1).

This support includes fully funded studies and allotted time to concentrate on building a research portfolio, illustrating the substantial institutional backing that aids in professional advancement and eases the financial burden associated with continuous education. These benefits not only foster individual growth but also contribute to the overall academic environment by encouraging ongoing learning and research development (Moffitt and Bligh 2024; Whitsed et al. 2025).

In brief, while the transition into academia was challenging, the rewards were substantial. Building networks, attending conferences, and experiencing personal and professional growth were significant benefits that made the journey of the participants worthwhile. These findings stress the importance of supportive structures and opportunities for professional development in enhancing the academic experience (Barrett and Brown 2014).

Overall, this section presented and discussed the findings of the article, which were clustered into three major themes i.e., motivations to become an academic, challenges with transitioning into academia, and the rewards from transitioning into academia. The next section synthesises the findings and provides an overall picture of this article’s submission to the body of literature on transitioning and SCAs.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

This article examined the motivations, challenges, and rewards of four new academics at two universities in the same region. From the findings of the article, participants were motivated by a profound passion for teaching and a sense of calling to share their knowledge and contribute meaningfully to the academic community, for example, **P3** and **P1**. However, participants also faced significant challenges, including adapting to new teaching methods, managing diverse classrooms, and navigating educational technologies, as observed in the comments of **P3** and **P1**. This echoes the observations of Sutherland and Taylor (2011, 183), who state that “newly appointed academics typically find the first few years of their academic appointment confusing, anxiety-inducing, and full of conflicting messages”. Similarly, in their co-autoethnography study on co-mentorship of SCAs, Hlengwa (2019) outlines the challenges faced by transitioning academics in higher education journeying through the process of institutional resocialisation as new, tenure-track faculty members.

Lack of support and mentorship further complicated participants' transition, with participants highlighting the need for effective guidance in career planning, research, and publication, as evident in the comments of **P1**, **P4**, and **P3**. Previous research on SCAs has shown that mentorship could enhance resilience at work, influence career decisions, and subsequently improve staff retention (Herman et al. 2021). In support, Hlengwa (2019) emphasises the importance of senior faculty or tenured mentors in assisting junior, pre-tenured academics navigate their way through new and unfamiliar tasks and responsibilities.

Challenges echoed by participants in this article, are consistent across different international contexts, for instance early academics in Australia face challenges such as work overload and lack of professional development, mirroring the challenges of high workload and inadequate support experienced by South African SCAs (Stratford, Watson and Paull 2024). Additionally in the UK, early academics also face job insecurity and the demands of balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities (Anderson, Gatwiri and Townsend-Cross 2020).

To add on the international perspective, LaRocco and Bruns (2006) observe that second-career academics often found it challenging to achieve a balance between their teaching and research duties. Similarly, Cumbie et al. (2005) highlight that new academics frequently encounter numerous obstacles on their path to scholarly success, including time constraints, teaching and administrative responsibilities, student demands, office interruptions, and a lack of collegial support. Without a supportive relationship or institutional backing, these challenges can become overwhelming and hinder the progress required to demonstrate competence and excellence in teaching, research, and service, key areas of responsibility that are crucial for the tenure process in academia (Badali 2004).

Despite these challenges, the academics experienced substantial professional growth through networking, attending conferences, and pursuing further studies. For instance, **P2** expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to receive study rebates at regional institutions, which they plan to fully utilise after completing their PhD, while **P4** highlighted the significant support received in public higher education compared to their previous experiences. This is consistent with the assertion of Herman et al. (2021, 77), who argue that “educational development activities should maximise the commitments, values, and sense of self-worth of SCAs”.

This article accents the importance of structured support and mentorship for SCAs. Institutions should acknowledge their unique challenges and provide targeted resources to facilitate their transition (Barrett and Brown 2014). Promoting reflective practice and fostering

a supportive academic environment can enhance their professional growth and integration into academia (Moges 2018). This is further elaborated in the following section where recommendations are proposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To facilitate the successful transition of SCAs into higher education, several strategies are recommended based on this article's findings. First, fostering a supportive environment through mentorship and open communication is crucial. Participants highlighted the value of having someone to confide in about their thoughts, feelings, and challenges during the transition. Mentorship minimises anxiety and provides emotional validation, as well as practical guidance in navigating the academic landscape. For instance, participants found comfort and therapeutic value in discussing their insecurities with trusted colleagues, who provided empathy and understanding.

Secondly, encouraging collaboration and participation in professional development opportunities is vital. Informal mentors, programme coordinators, and line managers played significant roles in helping participants onboard and consider professional development options, such as pursuing a PhD or engaging in regional developmental projects such as NATRC. These collaborations create spaces for sharing and learning, thereby mitigating the effects of transitioning into academia and fostering a sense of belonging within the academic community.

Additionally, promoting a growth mindset and resilience among SCAs can enhance their ability to thrive in academia. Participants emphasised the importance of embracing continuous learning and being open to acquiring new knowledge and skills. Engaging in short courses on teaching pedagogies and research supervision, for example, helps SCAs become better educators and researchers. Resilience and persistence in overcoming challenges, such as revising rejected papers or refining teaching methods, are also crucial in their academic journey.

Moreover, fostering a positive internal dialogue and practices such as gratitude journaling can help SCAs cope with the transition and challenges. Shifting focus to what they have achieved and maintaining a positive mindset can enhance their overall wellbeing and confidence.

Finally, institutions should ensure that there is accessible and consistent support from colleagues. Assistance with software challenges, research publications, and general academic guidance helps SCAs develop their knowledge and skills, easing their transition into academia.

In the context of this article, support from colleagues and line managers, who encouraged taking things slow and seeking help when needed, was invaluable in helping participants navigate the complexities of the academic environment.

Through the application of these strategies, higher education institutions can better the transition of SCAs, fostering their professional growth and integration into the academic community. This comprehensive support system ultimately contributes to a more diverse and enriched academic environment.

CONCLUSION

Transitioning into academia as a second career is a multifaceted journey, marked by both significant challenges and substantial rewards. This article, focusing on the experiences of SCAs at two universities in the same region in South Africa, reveals several key insights that can inform institutional support strategies. The participants were driven by a profound passion for teaching and a sense of calling to contribute meaningfully to the academic community. However, they faced considerable obstacles, including adapting to new pedagogical methods, managing diverse classrooms, and navigating educational technologies. The lack of adequate support and mentorship further compounded these challenges, underscoring the need for effective guidance in career planning, research, and publication. Despite these difficulties, the academics experienced professional growth through networking, attending conferences, and pursuing further studies, which enhanced their skills and expanded their professional horizons. The findings highlight the critical importance of providing structured support and mentorship to SCAs. Institutions should recognise the unique challenges these individuals face and offer targeted resources to facilitate their transition. Encouraging reflective practice and fostering a supportive academic community are essential strategies that can enhance their professional growth and integration into academia. Through addressing the specific needs of SCAs, higher education institutions can not only support their successful transition but also contribute to a more diverse and enriched academic community. This approach will ultimately benefit the broader academic environment by leveraging the unique perspectives and experiences that SCAs bring to higher education.

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