SA Journal of Industrial Psychology
ISSN: (Online) 2071-0763, (Print) 0258-5200

Institutional culture and academic career progression: Perceptions and experiences of academic staff

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Dates:
Received: 21 Jan. 2021
Accepted: 16 July 2021
Published: 17 Sept. 2021

How to cite this article:
Barnes, N., Du Plessis, M., & Frantz, J. (2021). Institutional culture and academic career progression: Perceptions and experiences of academic staff. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology/SA Tydskrif vir Bedryfsielkunde, 47*(0), a1878. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v47i0.1878

Orientation: The South African higher education system is highly dependent on institutional cultures to enable the progression of academics with the aim to unlock the research potential of the country. Institutional cultures are directed by the values, practices and behaviours of its members.

Research purpose: Establish and present, from the academics' point of view, the values, practices and behaviours that facilitate an enabling institutional culture, which supports the career progression of academic staff.

Motivation for the study: A comprehensive and deeper understanding of any higher education institutional culture requires analysis beyond the structural elements and established procedures of the institution. An understanding of how individuals interpret their environment, to support their career progression, is equally important.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative, phenomenological approach was followed, through individual, semi-structured interviews with 17 academics, across all career phases.

Main findings: An institutional culture in support of academic career progression includes three major values of: equity and inclusion, an ethic of care and collaboration, that are interconnected to practices such as performance management, a career management system, a comprehensive induction and orientation, a collaborative structure, remuneration, as well as resources and support, together with behaviours, comprising the articulation of team values, alignment of individual and institutional values, as well as a systemic approach.

Practical/managerial implications: Understanding the values, practices and behaviours within the context of higher education offers leaders and talent management practitioners the necessary factors to consider as they grapple to understand a culture that enables the career progression of academic staff.

Contribution/value-add: Deeper understanding, from the academics' point of view, the values, practices and behaviours that facilitate an enabling institutional culture, which supports the career progression of academic staff.

Keywords: enabling culture; institutional culture; career progression; higher education; academic career.

Introduction

The culture of higher education has a long and unique history, with the understanding that any attempt to appreciate the processes within the system must have an advanced comprehension of the culture of higher education (Callaghan, 2015). Moreover, higher education institutional cultures have always been regarded as resistant to change (Maguad, 2018). However, a national review, conducted by the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2016), confirmed the world-wide shifts in higher education, which necessitated the assessment and adjustment of institutional cultures. The enormity of the barriers that an institutional culture could represent has been acknowledged since the 1997 White Paper (Republic of South Africa [RSA], Department of Education [DOE], 1997). Consequently, the CHE report appealed to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to apply funding models that would enable a culture, conducive to unlocking South Africa's research potential, whilst developing and cultivating the academic profession (CHE, 2016).

The academic profession, however, similar to all other professions, is subjected to unprecedented challenges outside the scope of traditional continuity threats, such as the global pandemic, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated higher education institutions to respond, appropriately and efficiently

whilst ensuring delivery during a sustained crisis. Academic staff, therefore, were required to operate in a complex, evolving and dynamic environment, which required an institutional culture that was responsive to an era, characterised by a flux of change (Waller, Lemoine, Mense, Garretson, & Richardson, 2019). Career management and progression are critical during times of complexity, more so whilst engaging and cultivating key talent (Callanan, Perri, & Tomkowicz 2017; Donohue & Tham, 2019; Janse van Rensburg, Rothmann, & Diedericks, 2017a). Currently, the success of a university, more than ever, is dependent on the academic profession, their career progression and satisfaction, as well as their commitment and motivation to achieve the university's desired level of educational services and quality of scientific research (Szelągowska-Rudzka, 2018).

A focus on the career progression of academics, to address the primary concerns regarding the academic staff in the South African context, is further supported by the CHE review (CHE, 2016, p. 208). These concerns include recruitment, retention and equity of academic staff, as well as the expected retirement rates, against the backdrop of a great shortage of academics with suitable qualifications (CHE 2016, p. 290). Statistics confirm that South African universities need more academic staff with doctoral degrees, particularly from historically disadvantaged groups, to fill and increase the academic pipeline (Breier & Herman, 2017). Although academic exit, or turnover, is a global challenge, the capacity and sustainability of South African higher education institutions are threatened by the exodus of academics (Callaghan, 2015; Mashile, Munyeka, & Ndlovu, 2021). Furthermore, whilst it is difficult to appoint and retain academic staff with high standing (Theron, Barkhuizen, & Du Plessis, 2014), the CHE (2016) review acknowledges that academia is in competition with career offers from government, civil service and corporates, who all need to access the pool of highly skilled South African Black and women professionals.

Evidently, careers do not develop in isolation. Instead, careers within organisations are shaped by the organisation's strategy (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2016) and, specifically, the organisation's culture (Grobler, Rudolph & Bezuidenhout, 2014). An organisation's culture, therefore, is a powerful source and transmitter of social information, shaping individual career motivations, decisions and behaviours (Hall & Yip, 2016). The impact of culture on careers is not a new concept. Culture is identified by Kanter (1984), as well as Schein (1985) as both a cause and an effect on an employee's move within and across an organisation. Further studies highlight the need to understand and consider the organisational culture as critical for career management processes (Maher, 2017). Institutional culture is identified as a key reason for academic turnover (Mashile et al., 2021), together with the need for institutional culture to support academic development and progression (Lesenyeho, Barkhuizen, & Schutte, 2018). In a recent study, academic staff identified institutional culture as a challenge for their career management and progression (Barnes, Du Plessis, & Frantz, 2021).

With the challenges of higher education and the academic career in mind, a comprehensive and deeper understanding of any higher education institutional culture requires analysis beyond the structural elements and established procedures of the institution. An understanding of how individuals interpret their environment, to support their career progression, is equally vital. The objective history of any given institution, combined with established institutional norms, will result in a limited set of immutable outcomes for any given situation (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). An understanding of institutional culture allows real or potential conflicts to be considered in the broader institutional life, and not in isolation, whilst it allows the identification of structural or operational contradictions that suggest tension in the institution. In addition, it allows the evaluation and implementation of everyday decisions, with a keen awareness of its role in, and influence on institutional culture; provides an understanding of the symbolic dimension of seemingly instrumental decisions and actions; and considers why various groups in the institution hold varying perceptions about institutional performance (Tierney & Lanford, 2018).

It is against this context that the study aimed to establish and present, from the academics' point of view, the values, practices and behaviours that facilitate an institutional culture that supports the career progression of academic staff.

Literature review

Institutional culture within higher education

Institutional culture is equivalent to organisational culture (Vincent, 2015) and has been widely studied but narrowly defined for higher education (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). However, in the South African context, the restructuring of the higher education system necessitated a focus on institutional culture, as a strategic priority, and critical for the transformation agenda (CHE, 2016). In the South African national education system, the understanding is very clear that a relationship exists between culture and outcomes (Lesenyeho et al., 2018).

The study of organisational culture inspires various definitions in literature (Szydło & Grze´s-Bukłaho, 2020). At the same time, literature indicates that it has not been possible to formulate a widely accepted definition and that some researchers have advocated a complete rejection of the definitions of organisational culture for being useless or harmful (Mierzwa & Mierzwa, 2021). The concept is best understood through two main approaches. The first approach comprises an *anthropological* position and includes the argument of leading researchers such as Schein (1995) who described organisational culture as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that have been invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, taught to new members of the group as the correct way of solving problems. The anthropological approach views organisational culture and strategy as inseparably linked, and interdependent, not readily

manipulated or changed, but instead requiring a longer time for change to influence the deep assumptions entrenched by members in the culture (Willcoxson & Millett, 2000).

The second approach is based on a *sociological* concept (Szydło & Grześ-Bukłaho, 2020), and argues that organisational culture is but one aspect of the component parts of an organisation; an aspect that could be measured and changed, as in the case of other organisational variables, such as skills, strategy, structure and systems (Smart & St John, 1996). This approach is summarised by Mzangwa and Serpa (2019) as a set of values and beliefs, articulated to guide the organisation, translated into appropriate behaviours and reinforced through practices, such as rewards, and sanctions. The most commonly known definition held by this view is 'the way we do things around here' (Lundy & Cowling, 1995, p. 65). Martins and Terblanche (2003) further described this view as the deep-seated, often subconscious, values and beliefs, shared by personnel in an organisation. These values are often institutionalised through applied practices and represent decisions about the way strategies and values should be implemented. Moreover, values are only meaningful when they are translated into action or behaviours; therefore, the execution of intent is an integral part of the organisational culture.

With these two distinct approaches in mind, there seems to be considerable disagreement in the literature regarding organisational culture. Debates centre primarily around what constitutes organisational culture, whether the culture of a given organisation can ever be adequately described, if culture management can ever be truly effective, and if so, which management strategies are most likely to succeed (Tierney & Lanford, 2018).

Most contemporary discussions of institutional culture proceed from the epistemological stipulation that the organisational environment of higher education is socially constructed (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). This is consistent with the parallel and interdependent path approach of Tosti and Jackson (2015), as well as Mzangwa and Serpa (2019), which includes the strategy as one path that identifies what needs to be done, in terms of the goals, objectives and processes, whilst the other path, parallel to the strategy, includes the cultural aspect of the way things are done, in terms of values, practices and behaviours. This view holds the position that organisational culture is manifested in the typical characteristics of the organisation. It refers to a set of basic assumptions, which were so successful in the past that they were accepted as valid assumptions within the organisation. These assumptions are maintained in the continuous process of human interaction, which manifests itself in attitudes and behaviours. The components of routine behaviours, norms, values, philosophy and rules all form part of organisational culture (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Organisational culture, therefore, forms an integral part of the general functioning of an organisation (Mzangwa & Serpa, 2019). It is within this context that this paper adopted a sociological approach as the theoretical underpinning of institutional culture.

Values, practices and behaviours as part of institutional culture

The importance of a career enabling culture is evident. Higher education institutions should, like any other organisation, understand the characteristics of the institutional culture that directs the behaviours and attitudes of its members (Serinkan & Kiziloglu, 2021) and, moreover, that would contribute to the enablement and professional development of their employees (Grobler et al., 2014). These characteristics include the values, practices and behaviours, as summarised by Martins and Terblanche (2003). Values are described as the deeply held principles, ideals or beliefs that people embrace when making decisions and, therefore, are believed to stand at the very core of human decision making, emotional drivers and the culture created around individuals (Barrett, 2017). It represents the basic convictions that a specific mode of conduct, or end-state of existence, is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence (Miller, 2003). Values contain a judgemental element, as they carry an individual's ideas of what is right, good or desirable.

Drawing from institutional theory (Kostova & Roth, 2002), organisational practice is defined as an organisation's routine use of knowledge, to conduct a particular function that has evolved over time, under the influence of the organisation's history, people, interests and actions. Through coercive, mimetic and normative processes, organisations adopt certain structures, programmes, policies and procedures. Coercive processes occur when organisational patterns are imposed on organisations by a more powerful authority, namely mimetic processes (when organisations respond to uncertainty by adopting the patterns of other, successful organisations) or normative processes (when organisations adopt patterns considered appropriate in the environment).

The adoption of practice is further highlighted through two dimensions, namely implementation and internalisation (Kostova & Roth, 2002). Implementation is expressed in the external and objective behaviours, as well as the actions required, or implied, by the practice. Internalisation is the state in which the employees at the recipient unit view the practice as valuable for the unit and become committed to the practice. The positive perceptions about the value of the practice reflected in internalisation are important, as their 'action-generating' properties facilitate, not only the initial adoption of the practice but also its persistence and stability over time (Tolbert & Zucker, 1994, p. 7). Therefore, implementation and internalisation reflect the overall level, or depth, of adoption of the practice within the organisation (Kostova & Roth, 2002).

Behaviours are viewed from two perspectives. The behaviourist perspective describes behaviour as any action or function that could be observed objectively or measured in response to controlled stimuli (Bergh, 2006). This perspective limits the study of behaviour to quantitative events, which could best be investigated through laboratory experiments that yield objective measures, under controlled conditions. However,

another perspective, as described by the American Psychological Association (APA), describes behaviour as activities in response to external or internal stimuli, including objectively observable activities, introspectively observable activities, as well as unconscious or covert processes (APA, 2014).

It is important to note that whilst values, practices and behaviours are concepts, which could be defined distinctively, they are dynamic by nature and interchangeably connected in the concept of culture (Theron, 2006).

Research methodology

Research approach

The research approach included a qualitative, phenomenological study to address the research question: 'What are the values, practices and behaviours of an institutional culture to support the career progression of academic staff?' It consisted of in-depth, rich, detailed and heavily contextualised descriptions of academic experiences and views, which further allowed the researchers to identify and extract themes, as well as integrate the themes into meaningful descriptions (Munhall, 2001). The study, therefore, is underpinned by a constructivist worldview, which holds knowledge as multiple or relative truths, as individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live (Creswell, 2014).

Research setting

The study was conducted at a public university in the Western Cape, South Africa. Historically, the institution has been classified as a previously disadvantaged institution and has been the vanguard of South Africa's historic change, with a distinctive academic role in helping to build an equitable and dynamic nation. The university is challenged to demonstrate that it is capable of competing with the best, as well as play a prominent role in the intellectual, social and economic life of the nation. Seven academic faculties are hosted by the institution, namely the Faculties of Arts and Humanities, Community and Health Sciences, Dentistry, Education, Economic and Management Sciences, Natural Sciences and Law.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Following the approval from the university to conduct the research study, the researchers planned the necessary processes for the data collection. At the time of publication, the first author was a student whilst the remaining authors held permanent employment at the research university. In considering the impact of those roles on study outcomes, the authors acknowledge (1) participants' willingness to openly talk about their experiences and (2) authors' experience may influence data interpretation. The first author adopted the role of interviewer, whilst the remaining authors were consulted as experienced researchers, throughout the collection, analyses and interpretation of the data, to ensure that the data were presented in an accurate and truthful manner. Consultation amongst the researchers further prevented personal beliefs, values and experiences from influencing the interpretations formed and findings derived from the study (Creswell, 2014). Ultimately, the first author assumed the role of report writer, by writing up the findings, in consultation with the experienced research team.

Research participants and sampling methods

The target population of the study included full-time academics, employed at the university under a permanent employment contract during the 2020 academic year. Research identifies three main successive stages of an academic career trajectory (Christophersen, 2017), namely an early career stage, a mid-career stage and an established or advanced career stage. Whilst academic career promotion processes are governed by respective institutional policies and strategies, the development and progression of academic career stages are underpinned by the academic rank, that is, title of the academic position. For this reason, the academic rank of participants in the early career stage includes emerging scholars who are appointed as associate lecturers and lecturers, mid-career stage including academics who are appointed to the ranks of senior lecturers and associate professors and an advanced or established career stage including academics who have progressed to full professor. Moreover, academics, who held leadership roles, were also included as part of the research population as their experiences are valued to address the research question. Academics from the Dentistry faculty were not included as they hold a dual employment contract with the respective university, as well as the national Department of Health; therefore, additional employment processes and career progression practices had to be considered to understand their experiences of the institutional culture. Moreover, the study population excluded academics employed on a fixed-term contract.

With the above inclusion and exclusion criteria in mind, a purposive quota sampling technique was used to invite and recruit the participants for this study. This approach was based on the assumption that academics in various career phases, including academic leaders, may hold different and important views about the ideas and issues at question (Robinson, 2014), and therefore, a minimum of four and a maximum of five participants in each career phase were selected and interviewed. Sandelowski (1995) described an adequate sample size for a qualitative study, as one that permits a deep, case-oriented analysis, which results in a new and richly textured understanding of experience. A total of 17 academics across five of the faculties, in the various academic career stages responded, and were selected to participate in the study.

The participants included four early career academics, four academics in their mid-career, four academics in an advanced career stage and five academic leaders. Fifty-eight (58) per cent of the sample consisted of females, whilst 42% were

males. The ethnicity of the participants included 41.2% coloured people (a distinct South African racial group), followed by 35.3% black and 23.5% white people.

Data collection methods

To address the research question, a semi-structured interview was identified as the appropriate data collection method for the qualitative research design of this current study. The semi-structured interview method is suitable for studying participants' perceptions, experiences and opinions, in relation to a particular context (Barriball & While, 1994). All the interviews were conducted virtually, via an online platform, and audio-recorded, with permission from the participants. This method of data collection was used because of the social distancing protocols of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of data collection. All the participants were provided with an outline of the research process requirements, as well as detailed elements of consent and confidentiality, prior to the scheduled interview. Moreover, elements of consent were discussed and audio-recorded, whilst an opportunity was provided to address questions before the interviews commenced.

Data recording

Transcriptions were completed, based on the audio-recorded interviews, soon after they were conducted. Thematic analysis was performed on the full data set, during which emphasis was placed on the content of the text and not how the participants responded to the questions, with the aim of identifying, analysing and reporting on the patterns (themes) in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A deductive modality was adopted in an attempt to categorise the themes within the desired values, practices and behaviours.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

The trustworthiness criteria of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability* were considered to ensure the quality and integrity for the qualitative nature of the research study (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). *Credibility* refers to the confidence that could be placed in the truth of the research findings, as well as that the research findings represented plausible information and interpretation drawn from the participants' original data (Macnee & McCabe, 2008). The first author established credibility through the consultation and scholarly guidance of the two experienced researchers, as a way of peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is described as an opportunity for researchers to test their growing insights whilst being exposed to searching questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Consequently, an overview of background information, data collection methods and processes, data management and transcriptions, together with data analysis procedures and research findings, were discussed (Pitney & Parker, 2009). Moreover, the first author kept a journal, throughout the research process, to create an opportunity for reflexivity, thereby minimising researcher bias (Malterud, 2001).

Transferability refers to the degree to which the research methods and findings could be transferred to another research setting (Bitsch, 2005). The researchers, therefore, provided a comprehensive description of the research methodology and context whilst purposively selecting the participants. *Dependability* refers to the stability of the findings, over time (Bitsch, 2005), which could be achieved through the available audit trail for future researchers. This includes the raw data and interview notes (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). *Confirmability* is described as the degree to which the results of an inquiry could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). The audit trail also established the confirmability of the study (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Data analysis

Following the complete transcriptions of the interviews, the researchers engaged with the data set for in-depth knowledge, as part of the first critical step of the thematic approach followed, during the data analysis phase (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). Meaningful chunks of the data were identified as the units of analysis and added into a Microsoft Excel worksheet, per question. The units of analysis included phrases, words or whole paragraphs, which subsequently were assigned codes. An important step in the analysing and organising of qualitative data is the ability to identify and assign codes, or labels, to express or infer information, gathered during the study (Basit, 2003). These codes were later ordered into potential themes to generate a reasonable thematic map, in which the desired values, practices and behaviours were categorised.

Subsequently, all the themes were reviewed by the researchers, by checking them in relation to the coded extracts of the entire data set (Clarke et al., 2015). A few changes were affected by splitting or combining some themes whilst refining the boundaries of each theme. A final check was completed by the researchers to conclude the reviewing of the themes.

As a follow-up step, the themes were defined, and names were assigned, to ensure the conceptual clarity of each theme, as well as to provide a roadmap for the final step, namely the writing-up of the results to report on this current study. During the writing of the report, the first author weaved together the analytical narrative, together with data extracts, to contextualise the results and strengthen the validity of the interpretations (Clarke et al., 2015).

Reporting style

A narrative was provided to describe the themes identified to enhance understanding and clarity of the data. A Venn diagram was further used to present all possible logical relations between the themes, in relation to the desired values, practices and behaviours identified.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape, reference number: HS19/6/41.

Findings

The findings that emerged are in consonance with the purpose of the study, namely to establish and present the values, practices and behaviours that contribute to an institutional culture, which supports the career progression of academic staff. Whilst the components and various approaches of reliable career management strategies are well established (Lesenyeho et al., 2018), the findings provide a deeper understanding from the view of academics in all career phases. Several themes were derived from the identified codes and categorised into the values, practices and behaviours.

Values

Participants (P) identified a list of values that they considered would enable the culture of the university to support the progression of their careers. These values are synthesised in three major themes, namely equity and inclusion, collaboration and ethics of care.

Equity and Inclusion: The participants expressed the need for a culture that values equity and inclusion, by ensuring that all barriers relating to gender and race, which limits full participation and growth, are removed. This was shared by participants in the excerpts given below:

> '[*T*]he university needs to zoom in and unpack or grapple with those issues around personal development and how race and gender still influences our experiences.' (P17, female, black, academic leader)

> '[I]t becomes very stressful to access the writing retreats away from home as a single mom. I recognise the value of dedicated time off away from home for writing, but I need to find other constructive ways to publish that can work for me as a mother.' (P7, female, white, mid-career)

> 'I still find myself having to navigate through the male-female power dynamic, while the voices of my male peers are taken more seriously.' (P15, female, coloured, academic leader)

This finding is aligned with the extensive research to address the career barriers of marginalised groups in higher education (Zacher, Rudolph, Todorovic, & Ammann, 2019). Globally, the discourse of gender equity and the impact of academic career advancement remains a major concern in the 21st century (Angervall, Gustafsson, & Silfver, 2018). Similarly, the intersectionality of race and gender is acknowledged as a leading transformation barrier for academia in South African higher education (Luvalo, 2019).

The need for equity as a desired institutional value for academic career development was further identified by participants as a system that allows flexibility in its approach, to support individuals optimally, as expressed in the following excerpts:

> '… [*C*]areer management support should be conducive for individual needs. The same amount of research, teaching, community service and admin or committee work can't be allocated to create fairness. In my view, fairness is rather constructing it around the individual needs, while individual strengths are used to support and benefit other individuals. It is not fair to expect senior academics to do more mentoring and supervising emerging colleagues, with the same amount of teaching and admin work.' (P5, male, white, mid-career)

> '[*S*]ystems need to be flexible to accommodate individual research needs; a one size fits all approach is not the most efficient approach in my experience, when it comes to academic career advancement.' (P10, female, white, advanced career)

This view aligns with the principle of career development as a continuous process of goal setting and strategy development, with ongoing evaluation of its effectiveness (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2016). This, in turn, requires the flexibility to review and customise equitable academic career support. Whilst equity relates to the perception of fairness in the work environment when individuals compare the relationship between their job inputs and outcomes to the relationship between job inputs and outcomes of colleagues, the benefit of the value is evident. There is a positive impact on an individual's perception of equity and fairness regarding employee engagement, which in turn positively impacts career success and progression (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2016).

When work environments respect and empower differences, by identifying and removing barriers for equity and inclusion, individuals will be able to successfully grow in their careers (UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, equity and inclusion are desired institutional values that allow academics to optimally contribute in their work environments.

Ethics of care: Participants identified the value of holistic institutional support, including the need for transparent and authentic relationships with peers and their seniors, as shared in the following excerpts:

> '[*T*]he personal development initiatives that I was able to attend, have been very helpful for my growth and career.' (P1, female, white, early career)

> '[*I*]t is important for the university to acknowledging the personal in the professional; understanding that my personal wellbeing or challenges has an impact on my professional development.' (P7, female, white, mid-career)

These views are aligned to the finding that confirms the positive impact of personal wellbeing on individual output and performance, as well as a positive impact on individual career development (Warr & Nielsen, 2018). The need for authentic and transparent relationships was further identified by participants as an important element to build an enabling culture for academic progression as follows:

> 'I understand the push for us to collaborate, but it takes time to build and sustain the relationship; we need time to build authentic collaborative relationships; we need an open and sharing collegial culture, and an environment that is supportive.' (P8, female, black, mid-career)

> '[*T*]he safe and trusted spaces with my peers have been an enormous support for my career; we must be open to learn and grow from our mistakes and not fear being penalised.' (P17, female, black, academic leader)

> '[*T*]here is a need for safe spaces, where I can share some of my challenges, while also getting the trust and support from my line.' (P15, female, coloured, academic leader)

Archer (2008) highlighted the questions of authenticity and legitimacy, as central to the formation of relations within academia. The participants' experiences further align with the view that the management of organisational career development support practices should not only focus on the mechanical application of moral prescriptions but also on the process of creating and maintaining relationships, through which dilemmas that cannot be covered by prescription can be addressed (Janse van Rensburg, Rothmann, & Diedericks, 2017b). The overall need to value ethics of care to enable an institutional culture that supports academic career progression is supported by the findings that self-care in higher education is an ethic and is integral to meeting higher education goals (Bryan & Blackman, 2019).

Collaboration: Participants identified the value of opportunities to work with others to accomplish a common goal through the sharing of ideas, thinking and different perspectives. However, they believed that there should be a meaningful reason for working together, as it benefits all parties, including the institution. Participants shared as follows:

> 'I value authentic collaboration where our skills complement each other's.' (P7, female, white, mid-career)

> '[*C*]ollaboration should be mutually beneficial…when I work on a project with emerging scholars, I use the opportunity to coach and mentor them and at the same time, I see it as building my own career.' (P11, male, black, advanced career)

Collaboration in higher education has grown significantly, in many forms, in the last century (Newell & Bain, 2020), including research and scholarship amongst academics (García-Sánchez, 2014). However, there seems to be tension between the recognition of individual achievement in universities and the call for greater collaboration (Macfarlane, 2017). Collaborative success should therefore be considered through resourcing, protocols and participation whilst preventing structures that perpetuate more common individualised and competitive work practices (Newell & Bain, 2020).

Practices

The participants identified the practices to include performance management, a career management system, comprehensive induction and orientation, a collaborative structure, remuneration, as well as resources and support.

Performance Management: The need for faculties and departments to align their goals and objectives with their available resources, including the competencies and skills of their academic employees, was identified as an important practice for the success of academic career progression. A participant shared as follows:

> '[*T*]here is a need to look at how to use the resources and the skills or competencies in the department optimally, as well as to use established researchers to support the research output of others, but make sure that it becomes part of their official role for continuity.' (P5, male, white, mid-career)

The need for a systematic approach to manage academic performance, by differentiating the key performance areas, as well as the workload of academics in various career phases, was further highlighted as critical for academic career progression. Participants articulated:

> '[*W*]hen you are being assessed, it's not how many meetings you attended or when and how you had to stand in and represent your HOD, but it's how many articles and books you completed.' (P11, male, black, advanced career)

> '[*A*] performance planning conversation with my HOD is very helpful to guide my performance goals for the year.' (P1, female, white, early career)

> '[*P*]erformance conversations need to be streamlined more. It should also be more frequent and not just once a year to tick the box. There should also be discussion around the resources available to individuals. My performance goals should also be set in relation to the resources and support that I have access to.' (P3, female, coloured, early career)

> '[*P*]erformance outcomes should be structured with clear goals.' (P6, female, black, mid-career)

The overall finding is supported by the notion that performance management is a tool, which ensures that the organisation meets its overall objectives (Bussin, 2013). Literature further identifies a performance management system as a mechanism to manage remuneration and rewards objectively (Maimela & Samuel, 2016). It is, however, important to note that none of the participants identified the need for a performance management system to address concerns regarding remuneration during the study but solely as a practice to support their academic career development and progression.

Career Management System: Participants identified the need for an ongoing process to set and manage their career goals through opportunities and platforms offered by the university. A participant was of the view that:

> '[*T*]he goal setting theory tells us that if clear goals are set and realistic measures identified to achieve goals, you will be motivated to reach it.' (P5, male, white, mid-career)

Setting individual career goals further requires an assessment of the individual's needs and strengths whilst understanding the career opportunities. Participants expressed this in the following excerpts:

> '[*T*]here is a need to consider individual needs and recognise that certain strengths come with each career phase.' (P11, male, black advanced career)

> 'I need to understand the career path of an academic and how to become an established researcher.' (P2, male, coloured, early career)
>
> '[*W*]hile there is a guideline of the promotion process, knowing the promotion criteria will be very helpful in setting my career goals.' (P4, male, black, early career)

Moreover, career management system was identified as crucial to offering structured support programmes and platforms that enable the progression of individual careers. Such programmes include the 'continuous technical and professional development' as identified by participant P1 (female, white, early career), together with coaching and mentoring that emerged as a dominant strategy by several participants as follows:

> '[*T*]he mentoring is working very well for me.' (P3, male, black, early career)
>
> '[I]t's going much better since the formal appointment of my mentor as part of the nGAP [*New Generation of Academics Programme is a national programme implemented by government as a strategy to support transformation in higher education, by recruiting emerging scholars*]' (P3, female, coloured, early career)
>
> '[*M*]entors are very important, it has helped me significantly.' (P6, female, black, mid-career)
>
> '[*T*]here is a perception that you don't need support such as coaching and mentoring when you little more experienced, but I believe it should be offered at all levels.' (P8, female, black, mid-career)
>
> '[*T*]he coaching and leadership programme recommended by my dean was very helpful and carried me through my tenure as a HOD.' (P12, female, coloured, advanced career).

Peer support was another practice that was identified to support the career management of academics, as expressed by participants:

> '[*T*]he opportunity to connect and engage with peers is very helpful.' (P7, female, coloured, mid-career)
>
> '…[*T*]alking and connecting with my peers in the same situation, is also very helpful.' (P1, female, white, early career)

This finding is supported by literature, which advocates a strategic career management approach that requires the systemic consideration, alignment and integration of career management practices, tools and interventions, with the overall strategy, policy and practices of an organisation (Lesenyeho et al., 2018).

Sabbatical leave was identified as another critical element to consider as part of a career management system. Participant P7 stated,

> 'We need time to think and sabbatical is the one time you can actually deepen your knowledge. Reconsider sabbatical by staggering it, or shorter sabbaticals to accommodate more academics. Taking a term or six month break from teaching is also helpful.' (P7, female, white, mid-career)

This finding, therefore, is also aligned with literature that regards sabbatical leave as an important process in the production and exchange of scientific knowledge, as well as the subsequent positive impact on the academic career (Zahir & Fakhri, 2011).

Furthermore, the importance of supporting and developing leadership capability was identified as critical to managing a career management system. Participants shared as follows:

> '[*F*]eedback and guidance from your HOD is critical, but remember, all HODs are not good leaders. They also need support to develop the capability to guide and support others.' (P5, male, white, mid-career)
>
> '[*T*]he best academics don't necessarily make the best leaders. A willingness for personal development is important for academic leadership as it's a different competency and skill set and therefore needs to be supported in that particular way.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)

This view is supported by literature that identifies performance appraisal and feedback from leaders as a critical step in the development of a career plan (Lesenyeho et al., 2018). The overall finding of a career management system to enable academic career development and progression is evident.

Comprehensive induction and orientation: A comprehensive induction into the higher education sector, clarification regarding the expectations and role of an academic, together with the complete orientation and understanding of the academic career path, was identified as an essential practice for academic career progression. Participants shared in the following excerpts:

> '[*I*]t is important to understand the career paths of an academic as an emerging scholar. You have to understand the academic leader role and plan your career accordingly.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)
>
> '[*T*]he professionalisation course during probation, as part of the orientation, was very empowering. It helped me to understand the bigger picture and career path of an academic.' (P1, female, white, early career)

Academic induction, including the orientation into the higher education system, is an essential practice to enable the career development and progression of individuals (King et al., 2018). Whilst the need for induction and socialisation programmes into academia is recognised, and studies show the positive experience for emerging scholars as it creates a sense of confidence into academia (Kensington-Miller, 2018), literature also identifies potential risks. This includes the impact on academic identity that Schulze (2014, p. 1) referred to as 'a deeply ambiguous concept, incorporating ideas of differences and sameness, individuation and identification, and distinctiveness and embeddedness'.

Collaborative structures: The strategic and formal partnering of academics in various career phases to complete projects was identified as a required practice to ensure an enabling culture for academic career progression. This was shared by participants in the following excerpts:

> 'In my experience, where teams were set up with diverse skill sets, people complemented each other, and that set-up allowed academics in various phases to learn from each other.' (P11, male black, advanced career)

> '…[*E*]xpecting people to assist from a place of "good will" might be unrealistic. To create the culture, you should provide some sort of incentive or create a mutual beneficial practice. Emerging researchers should be partnered with experienced researchers, to guide and provide supervisory support. Supervising emerging academics should become part of their deliverables. Established researchers should in turn be rewarded by taking some admin away. They should be strategically and formally partnered to work and help each other. This collaboration and partnerships should however be managed by the HOD.' (P5, male, white, mid-career)

This finding aligns with the research that identifies the benefits of collaboration to include sharing new perspectives across disciplinary boundaries, pooling scarce resources and as a means of mentoring inexperienced academics or research students (Macfarlane, 2017). Whilst higher education institutions are encouraged to develop and implement formal structures and practices to cultivate the collaboration needed for dynamic and productive individual academic careers (Newell & Bain, 2017), research also indicates that in addition to organisational structures, there is a complex matrix of personal, professional and social or cognitive factors to be considered. The willingness of academics to collaborate, together with their understanding of shared goal or mutual benefit, is crucial to the effectiveness of collaboration (Newell & Bain, 2020).

Remuneration: Remuneration was identified by a participant as a practice to consider for the development of an enabling culture. Participant P16 articulated that:

> 'remuneration is a factor in comparison to other institutions in South Africa and competitive or market related salaries are important.' (P16, male, coloured, academic leader)

The importance of remuneration, as an extrinsic motivator, appears to be another controversial topic in higher education (Bussin, 2013). There is, however, a strong view that remuneration practices, in general, can motivate or maintain behaviour, which could influence and embed the desired organisational culture in an organisation (Lesenyeho et al., 2018)

Resources and support: The participants identified the appropriate allocation of resources and support, as essential for the development of the desired culture to support academic progression. This was expressed by participants in the following excerpts:

> '…[*T*]he infrastructure in laboratories are critical to support my current research and teaching.' (P9, male, black, advanced career)

> '…[*T*]he department is sometimes limited by resources. We have great plans and visions but can only execute to the extent of our resources. As an academic leader, I have to jump in and assist when there's a gap and that impacts my research … so ideally, resources need to follow your strategy.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)

> 'I find the benefit of tutoring support to enable academic career progression.' (P12, female, coloured, advanced career)

The research funding model was also identified as a mechanism to support academic leaders, in particular. Participant P13 stated:

> 'it is very challenging to apply for funding while wearing two hats at the same time and therefore, there should be some support for us during our leadership tenure.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)

Whilst research on the role of work resources in academic career development is limited, Zacher et al., (2019) argued that there are several factors, including institutional resources and support, which could serve as contextual affordances to either promote or hinder academic career development.

Behaviours

Whilst many behaviours could be identified to articulate the identified values, and various behaviours will emerge from the identified practices, three specific behavioural themes were identified, when the participants were asked to state the behaviours required, to create a culture that enables academic career progression. These behaviours include the articulation of team values, alignment of individual and institutional values, as well as a systemic approach.

Articulation of team values: A participant identified the importance of identifying and clearly articulating the values to all staff members. Participant P13 indicated that:

> 'there is a need to be clear about the team values, but also to make sure everyone understands the behaviours that support the values.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)

Literature confirms that values influence people's priorities (Mzangwa, 2019), and therefore the need to align or identify behaviours, to articulate the values, is identified as a critical approach to embed the desired culture (Barrett, 2017). Tierney and Lanford (2018) viewed that if the values of a university are not articulated frequently or are unclear, the mission statement may be ineffectual, and institutional priorities may be contested by various actors.

Alignment of individual and institutional values: The alignment of individual values with institutional goals was identified as important to create the desired culture. Participant P13 expressed that:

> 'it is important to align your personal values with the institutional values.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)

Research shows that the greater the alignment between the personal values of the people in the organisation and those chosen by the organisation, the higher the impact on engagement and individual effectiveness. More specifically, when people perceive the values of the organisation to be more aligned with their own values, they are able to bring more of their effort and energy to the workplace (Barrett, 2017; Rhoades, 2005).

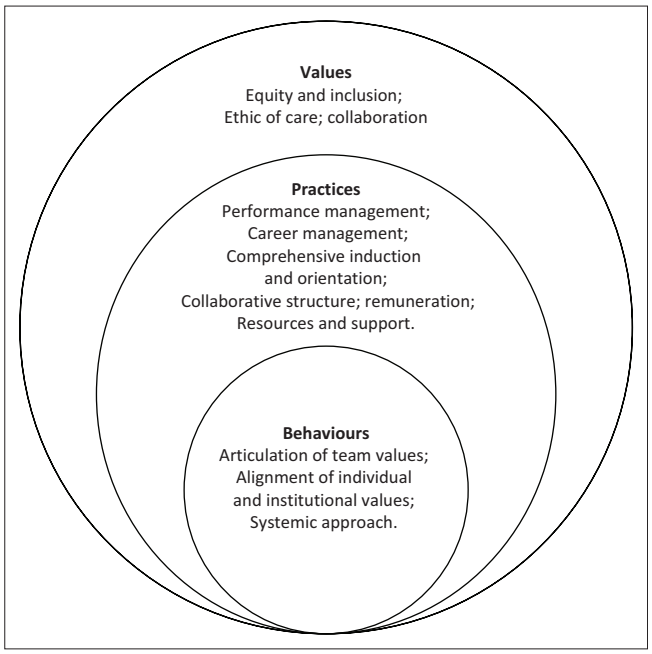

FIGURE 1: Institutional culture that supports academic career progression.

A systemic approach: The need to understand how systems and practices impact each other, and especially, that various factors need to be considered when particular decisions are made within a system, was identified as critical to enable a culture. One of the participant expressed:

> '[*T*]here is a need for a systemic approach to respond to the needs and support of academics. We need to recognise that there are factors outside the department, at institutional level, and to a certain extent, outside the university that impacts the development and progression of my career.' (P13, male, coloured, academic leader)

A systemic approach to career progression is not new. Von Bertalanffy (1967, p. 133) recognised career management as a 'complex of elements standing in interaction' and 'single parts and processes cannot provide a complete picture of the vital phenomena'. This finding is aligned to the systemic approach of career development that recognises the process as complex and dynamic and the interrelated and dependency of the individual within a broader context (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

Conceptual model of the findings

To provide a summary conceptual model of the findings, a stacked Venn diagram is utilised, as it acknowledges the dynamic and interchangeable nature, as well as the potential overlap of the values, practices and behaviours within an institutional culture (Shade & Handelsman, 2012) (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The study aimed to establish and present, from the academics' point of view, the values, practices and behaviours that facilitate an enabling institutional culture, which supports the career progression of academic staff. In doing so, a stacked Venn diagram was utilised to create a conceptual model that acknowledges the dynamic and interchangeable nature, as well as the potential overlap of the values, practices and behaviours within an institutional culture.

The interconnections of the themes are evident as all the practices and behaviours are underpinned by a clear thread of the three major synthesised values. Participants identified equity and inclusion as a critical value that should be echoed through practices and behaviours that demonstrate flexibility in career management approaches and support, by considering individual strengths, intersectionality, and different academic career stages. It is evident that equity and inclusion remain a priority in higher education and that it should be actively considered by institutions as they grapple to negotiate the landscape for academic career success.

Personal benefits of collaboration were acknowledged whilst emphasising the importance of embedding values through practices, by clearly articulating and aligning individual and institutional values.

The study further highlighted some controversial discourses in higher education, including performance management (Maimela & Samuel, 2016). Whilst reference was made to the need for clear performance goals and feedback, participants demonstrated their readiness for performance engagements and acknowledged the value of it for individual career growth in an environment that does not employ a prescribed performance management system. Literature highlights the need to consider contextual factors, including individual readiness, for successful implementation of any system or change initiative (Cameron & Green, 2019). This need for performance management was further underpinned by an ethic of care that encourages the creation of trusted spaces for the holistic development.

Whilst the study did not include a comparative analysis, it is interesting to note that participants experienced certain themes differently, such as the alignment and allocation of resources and support, as well as access to career development platforms. Early career academics acknowledged the value of their support structures, such as mentors. Academics in the mid- and advanced career stage, however, identified the need for formalised structured support, including the need to capacitate leaders as critical partners in career engagements. Whilst academics encountered linear developmental pathways within a stable employing environment in the past, the contemporary academic career experiences volatility that demands a structured career management approach (Bennett, Roberts, Ananthram, & Broughton, 2018; Callanan et al., 2017). A South African study identified the absence of a structured career management approach as a challenge for academics' career progression (Barnes et al., 2021).

The findings further confirm that academic induction and orientation practices form part of the critical engagements that shape the academic identity of an individual that could

either have a favourable or detrimental impact on the career trajectory of an early career academic (Hlengwa, 2019). Higher education institutions are therefore encouraged to provide personalised, professional scaffolding for scholarly development and to monitor its effectiveness whilst seeking opportunities to build a more supportive academic culture (Billot & King, 2017).

With remuneration practices as another controversial topic in higher education, the university might benefit from understanding the remuneration preferences of their knowledge workers (Bussin & Brigman, 2019) and intricacies of institutional context. Literature identifies an institutional model of academic salary that emphasises remuneration as an expression of institutional norms and values, regardless of institutional missions, and that institutional forces can dictate academic salary levels (Kwiek, 2018).

The study highlights the role of values as the deeply held principles, ideals or beliefs that people embrace at the very core of human decision making, emotional drivers and the culture created around individuals (Barrett, 2017). The objective history of any given institution, combined with established institutional norms, will result in a limited set of immutable outcomes for any given situation. It is clear from the study that by consciously interrogating and understanding the values, leaders can assess the probable outcome of practices and behaviours that inform institutional culture, before charting a course of action (Tierney & Lanford, 2018).

Limitations and recommendations

Whilst this current study identified the factors in relation to the desired values, practices and behaviours of an enabling institutional culture, to support the career progression of academic staff at a respective university, the findings cannot be extended to the broader research population as a primary disadvantage of a qualitative approach and interviewing a limited number of participants (Creswell, 1994). The findings can, however, provide leaders and talent management practitioners in the higher education sector with the factors to consider, as they endeavour to understand the progression of academics, within the context of institutional culture in higher education.

Practical implications

This current research contributes to existing knowledge of career management values, practices and behaviours within the context of higher education. The findings, therefore, provide leaders and talent management practitioners in the higher education sector with the factors to consider as they endeavour to understand a culture that enables the career progression of academic staff. It offers leaders and practitioners a keen awareness of potential values, practices and behaviours, which influence, as well as potentially conflict with, the career management decisions and actions of academic staff in the broader institutional life and not in isolation. Moreover, the relationship and interchangeable connection of the values, practices and behaviours of this current study are a reminder of the dynamic nature of culture, as well as that understanding career development challenges in isolation cannot provide a complete picture as a vital phenomenon (McMahon & Patton, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study established and presented, from the academics' point of view, the values, practices and behaviours that facilitate an enabling institutional culture, which supports the career progression of academic staff. The findings highlight the dynamic and interchangeable nature, as well as the overlap of the values, practices and behaviours within an institutional culture. It particularly identified the interconnections as all the practices and behaviours are underpinned by a clear thread of the three major synthesised values.

The study further demonstrated that a comprehensive and deeper understanding of how individuals interpret their environment, to support their career progression, is important as the objective history of any given institution, combined with established institutional norms, will result in a limited set of immutable outcomes for any given situation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors made a substantial contribution to the conception and design of the study, together with the analysis and interpretation of the data. N.B. drafted the manuscript, M.D.P. and J.F. critically revised it for important content. All authors approved the final version for submission of the manuscript.

Funding information

The research was financially supported by the Academic Doctorate Advancement Programme Towards Transformation (ADAPTT).

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.B., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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