THE DOCTORAL DEGREE AND THE PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE ACADEMICS

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study explored the professional academic identity development of female academics before and after obtaining their doctoral degrees. The aim was to identify areas to target in order to support the development of the academics’ robust professional identities. Using a narrative research approach, two female academics were interviewed repeatedly over a period of three and a half years, complemented by e-mail conversations. Symbolic interactionism and self-efficacy theory were utilised as lenses to interpret the data. The research offered three key findings. It revealed that obtaining a doctoral degree does not automatically develop the desired professional identity. The study further identified five areas to target when supporting female academics in their identity development. Self-efficacy permeated all five areas.
INTRODUCTION

When starting my career at the University of South Africa (Unisa) many years ago as a white female without a doctorate, the vast majority of academics in general, and professors in particular, were white males. Since the democratic elections held in South Africa in 1994, this imbalance has been consciously addressed, partly enforced by subsidies based conditionally on the appointment of academics of previously disadvantaged groups (Vandeyar 2010). The demographics of Unisa have thus changed markedly with many female and non-white academics having been appointed.

Many new appointees at higher education institutions (HEIs) do not have doctoral qualifications. In South Africa, a doctoral degree is generally acquired by navigating a rather challenging route based solely on research. Studying towards the degree provides entry into the rigorous world of research and thus offers the individual a way into academia (Wadee et al. 2010). Obtaining a doctorate provides proof that, according to the evaluation of experts, the candidates have significantly contributed to new knowledge (Eddy and Rao 2009). Since this enhances the academics’ status, their careers only start to develop seriously after they have obtained a doctorate (Henkel 2005).

However, after graduating with a doctorate, many academics find it difficult to integrate into academia and develop robust professional academic identities (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek and Hopwood 2009). The supervision of postgraduate students, which would confirm their ‘entry into the research and academic community’ (Johnston 1995, 281), may present a formidable task. Firstly, using their own supervisors as role models, they may misunderstand what supervision involves (Austin 2002; Bieber and Worley 2006). Their supervisors may have focused only on managing the research project; on socialising the student into a disciplinary community; on critical thinking to evaluate research work; or on providing pastoral care to the student (Lee 2008). Secondly, the newly doctored academics may be challenged by a lack of autonomy of many of the South African students that they have to supervise (Mouton 2007), which can be attributed to the legacy of apartheid (Olivier 2007).

In addition, the academics may be uncertain how to align their own values with those of the institution (Austin 2002; Bieber and Worley 2006). They may receive mixed messages about the relative importance of teaching versus research. At Unisa, appointments and promotions are based primarily on the grounds of research outputs. However, simultaneously, academics are told that the institution is ‘learner-centred’ and ‘service-focused’, which implies a strong commitment to the lecturer’s role as

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teacher (Makhanya 2014, 16). Unisa also sets great store by knowledge production for national development with regard to unemployment, poverty and inequality (Labuschagne 2014), but these focus areas may not necessarily be in line with the interests of individuals.

In the international arena, research indicates that gender and racial group factors may increase difficulties for newly doctored scholars (Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013). Due to family responsibilities, female academics may have less time than their male counterparts to socialise with colleagues who could provide support (Mansfield et al. 2010). Moreover, female academics of colour in United States (US) HEIs are often confronted by situations that constrain their authority (Turner 2000). They frequently feel that they are under-respected and over-used for work that is not rewarded, such as committee work.

In South Africa, white female academics have found that they have to work exceptionally hard, dress professionally and be careful not to project arrogance and moral grandstanding in order to earn the respect of their male colleagues (Perumal 2003). According to Vandeyar (2010), some black (female) academics have had to weigh the possibility that they were tokens used by former white HEIs as evidence that institutional affirmative action programmes were on track. These academics were often treated with a lack of respect and given few opportunities for socialisation into disciplinary communities that could support them to develop identities as productive members (Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013; Vandeyar 2010).

The above indicates the importance of insight into how day-to-day experiences impact on female academics’ sense of identity with regard to ‘be (com)ing an academic’ (McAlpine et al. 2009, 98). Knowledge of the identity development of female academics before and after completing their doctoral degrees suggests how they can be supported best in order to establish themselves as fully fledged academics (Hall and Burns 2009). This is particularly important in the light of the skills drain from South African universities caused by the number of productive academics who retire annually. An electronic search of the literature indicated a lack of current research into the issue in South Africa, hence this investigation. A useful lens to enhance relevant understandings is provided by symbolic interactionism and self-efficacy theory.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND SELF-EFFICACY THEORY

Symbolic interactionism is the way individuals learn to understand and give meaning to the world through their interaction with others (Plunkett n.d.). There are three core principles that contribute to symbolic interactionism, namely, meaning, language and thought. The meaning that individuals derive from their contact with objects and people in their life-worlds shapes their symbolic interpretation. Symbols are the
things to which people attach meaning (Henslin 2012), for example, ‘supervisors’ and ‘research’. These symbols are interpreted through thought, using language as a vehicle. Language also enables reflection through which academics can modify their understanding of symbols, such as the meaning of their interaction with other academics.

Another key concept of symbolic interactionism is identity, which has personal, situational and social dimensions (Vryan, Adler and Adler 2003) that interrelate with professional identity. Personal identity is related to the uniqueness of people, such as their personal histories. Situational identity develops through meaningful interaction with others, for example, with supervisors. This interaction can facilitate people’s development of identities as competent researchers (Dison 2004). Social identity develops in interaction with socially constructed categories of people (e.g., mentors), or in a person’s position within a social structure, such as a university. Roles and role taking are major concepts of symbolic interactionism that add to individuals’ social identities. Roles are a set of beliefs that define individuals’ conventional patterns of behaviour, while role-taking is the ability to perceive themselves in the same way as others do. In a rapidly changing society, academics experiment with different roles and constantly re-create their professional identities (Haamer, Lepp and Reva 2012). This makes the development of a strong professional identity complex.

Professional identities are anchored in the intersection of the individuals’ ‘educational beliefs and practices, institutional policies, sectorial boundaries, and the socio-cultural, economic and political context in which their profession is embedded’ (Tran and Nguyen 2013, 199). Academics’ professional identities develop through the interaction of an inward and an outward journey. The inward journey necessitates reflection during which the academics make sense of themselves as academics (Haamer et al. 2012). The outward journey occurs when the academics engage with the academic world (Sutherland and Markauskaite 2012; Tran and Nguyen 2013).

Individuals can actively control their own identities (Chang et al. 2013; Clegg 2008), referred to as ‘agency’ (Haamer et al. 2012). Academics re-construct their professional identities continuously as various experiences impact on their identities in their contexts (Henkel 2005; Sutherland and Markauskaite 2012). Wenger (1998) refers to the fluidity of the professional identity as a ‘learning trajectory’, a process of being and of becoming. The professional identities develop from the individuals’ engagement with relevant communities of practice during which they develop the knowledge, skills, values and culture of academics.

Individual academics may adopt multiple identities, some of which are more valued than others (e.g., ‘competent researcher’ may be more valued than ‘capable chair’). Academics may also have beliefs about their future identities that can have motivational value (Haamer et al. 2012). Although an individual’s professional identity is influenced by his/her professional knowledge and skills, it has a socio-emotional component related to self-efficacy (Macleod 2011).
Self-efficacy is an aspect of social cognitive theory. Bandura (in Maddux 1995, 7) defines self-efficacy as people’s ‘beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over task demands’. Self-efficacy plays a central role in how individuals use their skills (Evans 1989). It influences thinking, motivation and perseverance in the face of difficulties, and is developed by: mastery of experiences; modelling; feedback from significant others; and judgments of physiological indicants of personal vulnerabilities. Environmental events, inner factors (cognition, emotion, and biological events), and behaviour are mutually interacting influences on the lives of academics which shape their self-efficacies and identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW
In their study with Canadian and United Kingdom (UK) doctoral students who aspired to be academics, McAlpine et al. (2009) found that a range of experiences contributed to their academic identities. Doctoral specific events included the visible elements of the formal requirements of the thesis; semi-formal activities related to workshops and meetings with supervisors; and informal activities which encompassed reading the literature, writing chapters and conversing with peers. General academic events that contributed to an academic identity comprised formal activities (presenting conference papers, submitting articles and teaching); semi-formal activities (attending conferences); and informal activities (writing and reading). Participation in such experiences is crucial to integrate into academia (Turner 2000).

Mentoring seems to play an important role in the acquisition of professional academic identities by staff (Turner 2000), although mentors should not regulate their mentees’ identities (Manathunga 2007). Mentoring helps mentees to develop their skills and attain important understandings. It differs from supervision in that supervisors are formally appointed to help students meet institutional requirements for a degree. In contrast, mentors are experienced academics who establish more intimate relationships with the mentees and consciously contribute to their professional socialisation (Millett and Nettles 2006). Sometimes the supervisor functions as mentor.

Limited time, negative affect, writing block, insufficient resources, inadequate support (McAlpine et al. 2009), and a focus on discipline-based knowledge and skills only (Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013) inhibit the development of robust professional academic identities. Hurdles experienced by black academics at a US university were a lack of meaningful socialisation into the academic world; an absence of effective mentoring; and the inability to articulate a sustainable research agenda. In South Africa, black novice academics at a previously white university were alienated by a lack of initiation into departments; limited meaningful involvement in
teaching and research; and an absence of mentoring and informal networking with white colleagues (Vandeyar 2010).

With the above as background, this study aimed to explore the identity development of academic females before and after obtaining their doctoral degrees. To this end, a narrative research approach was used.

**METHODOLOGY**

A narrative is defined as a ‘discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings’ (*Webster’s Concise Dictionary* in Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998, 2). The approach enables the participants to reflect on their experiences and construct their identities in stories.

This article centres on the narratives of two female academics who were still enrolled for their doctoral degrees in the social sciences at the beginning of the research. They were selected from a wider collection of narratives because the richness of their stories offered significant insights into their professional identity development. Ingrid was a 47-year-old white, Afrikaans-speaking female and Vuyo was a 50-year-old black, Sotho-speaking female when the research commenced. (Pseudonyms are used.) Their studies were supervised by white, Afrikaans-speaking females.

The study was conducted over three and a half years and was thus longitudinal. At the start of the project, Ingrid was halfway through her studies, while Vuyo was nearing completion. Data collection was mainly by means of interviews which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first interview commenced with a request that the participant give an account of her life journey up to the point of being an academic enrolled for her doctoral degree (Rosenthal 2003). I took notes to enable me to ask clarification questions. After three years, the two participants had obtained their doctoral degrees and a second round of interviews was conducted. The participants narrated their academic lives since the previous interview, and I probed their accounts. The third round of interviews was conducted about six months later to explore preliminary themes that had been identified from the previous transcripts. The six data transcripts were complemented by e-mail conversations as required.

The narratives were analysed holistically. I considered the participants’ historical journeys; the meaning they attached to their feelings and views (inner focus); and their interpretation of the social interactions they had (outer focus) (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). I also compared the narratives for a thematic analysis by considering the participants’ voices and the theories of symbolic interactionism and self-efficacy (Lieblich et al. 1998). From the six narratives, five themes emerged with implications for the identity development of female academics. Trustworthiness of the data was determined by the adequacy, credibility and authenticity of how the experiences were portrayed over time (Connelly and Clandinin 1999) as illustrated in the findings.
FINDINGS

The participants constructed their identities through their interaction with significant others throughout their lives. The feedback they received when they assumed different roles over time assisted them in developing their identities as professional academics (Clandinin and Connely 2000).

Personal identity portrait: Ingrid

Ingrid spent her school years in Pretoria. Her father died when she was in Grade 10 and her mother passed away during her second year at university when she was 19 years old. These losses made her determined to prove that she could cope on her own. Since her parents had attached importance to high achievement, she excelled and passed the matriculation examination with six distinctions. This allowed her to obtain a bursary to study for a degree in languages. She married directly after completing her degree. While working, she enrolled for a degree in social work. When her second child was born, she began studying towards a master’s degree. This enabled her to obtain a junior lectureship at Unisa in 2008.

Reflecting on her career, Ingrid identified significant role players in her academic life, such as her parents. Others included her guardian, who discouraged her from a career in social work citing poor remuneration as reason; her language teachers at school, who motivated her to study languages; and her colleagues at the University of Pretoria, who egged her on to pursue an academic career when she was briefly employed at that institution as an assistant. Since Ingrid’s husband was a minister, the family moved often, preventing her from developing her own career. It was only after she had been employed at Unisa and her elder daughter started Grade 9 that Ingrid refused to move again.

In reference to her doctoral studies, she declared:

Part of doing this doctorate is to build a future for myself and try and climb the ladder as quickly as I can to build my pension. So, unfortunately it is not an idealistic: ‘I study because I enjoy it so much!’

Although her marriage fell apart in 2012, Ingrid continued with her studies and completed her doctoral degree at the end of 2013 after five years of enrolment.

Personal identity portrait: Vuyo

Vuyo completed her school education and her first degree in Lesotho. After moving to South Africa in 1988, she completed an honours and a master’s degree at a university in Johannesburg. She then worked as a secondary school teacher until the end of 1995. Thereafter, she accompanied her husband to New York for three years...
where he studied towards a PhD. When they returned to South Africa, she struggled to find work. In 2002, they moved to Pretoria and she started doing ‘odd jobs’ for different institutions. In 2006, she obtained a teaching contract at Unisa. At the end of 2008, she obtained full employment as a lecturer on condition that she registered for a doctorate.

Reflecting on important influences on her decision to become a teacher, Vuyo identified her father, a teacher, and the speed with which graduates with teaching qualifications found employment after graduation. Another important influence was her husband. She stated:

He’s been very, very influential. He is very driven and he was always encouraging me. When we came back from America and I couldn’t get a job, I became so demoralised that I just wanted to stay at home and do absolutely nothing. But he was always encouraging me. If a post was advertised he would encourage me to apply, saying: ‘You will get something.’

After being employed at Unisa as a lecturer, Vuyo realised that she could enjoy an academic career. She completed her doctorate in 2011 after four years of study.

**DISCUSSION**

A comparison of the participants’ narratives revealed five themes which may resonate with other female academics. These themes relate to the organisational environment; the supervisor; mentors; the female gender role; and the negotiation and re-negotiation of identities before and after having completed a doctorate.

**Opportunities and constraints in the organisation**

While enrolled for their degrees, Unisa offered the two participants opportunities to develop their skills at professional development workshops. With regard to writing workshops, Murray (2007, 1069) argues that ‘the writer’s sense of role, identity and voice’ influences the writing process and that the writing socialises the authors into their academic disciplines. Writing can therefore develop self-efficacy and academic identity (Zimmerman and Bandura 1992). Both participants attended workshops to develop their research and writing skills. This enabled Vuyo to refresh her ‘terribly rusted’ memory of research methods. Ingrid attended workshops on the writing of articles and thus completed two articles, which encouraged her ‘to become independent’.

Both participants also referred to opportunities to attend conferences locally and abroad. In this way funding provided by Unisa enabled Vuyo to present a paper on her doctoral research. When her paper was accepted for publication in the conference proceedings, the realisation that something had materialised from her doctoral studies was ‘a highlight’ that developed her academic identity.
Both participants found it difficult to find the time necessary to complete their studies. During the first interview, Vuyo recalled how she started her doctorate in 2008 ‘with enthusiasm’ and thought that she would complete her studies quickly, but a teaching load of eight modules prevented this:

So, I didn’t do anything. So, some of the joy of my studies is to finish a chapter and see myself moving forward to where I am now [near submission]. We get markers [to mark student assignments], but you still have to do the administration, and that takes time.

Thereafter, the institution started to reduce the workload of academics who were enrolled for their doctorates and allowed ad hoc academic leave to write their theses. Research and Development (sabbatical) leave could also be used for this. During the second interview, Ingrid stated:

From February to July I had Research and Development Leave. It was amazing! Without this I would not have been able to complete my studies. It was a time of withdrawing and writing.

After having completed her degree, Vuyo felt that the bi-annual Integrated Performance Management System (IPMS) evaluations of all staff in key performance areas assisted her since it gave ‘structure’ to her academic life by providing her with concrete goals that had to be met.

You knew that you needed to attend conferences, what you needed to do with regard to tuition and in other areas. It is like if you are a teacher and you have a lesson plan ... it keeps you on track. I feel the IPMS gives you that structure. But, at the same time, sometimes there are things that prevent you from achieving everything that you have put in your contract and you know that if you don’t achieve you are not going to get that performance bonus.

As newly doctored academics, both women experienced institutional constraints. In reference to expectations to publish, Vuyo stated.

I think that could be demotivating. Personally I feel individual academics should be allowed to work at their own pace. I am really not for people being pushed to publish or perish. Then you don’t do something because there is something pushing you from inside, but something is pushing you from outside. When you are forced, you just look for this and that and just write so that you can have something to put on the table when you are assessed during the IPMS.

Ingrid referred to the excessive bureaucracy and uncertainties of administrative staff at various levels who needed to support her when she wanted to implement a life coaching programme that she had designed during her doctoral studies. During the last interview, she stated: ‘It was a very slow process. I have begun to question whether it was worth the effort. I have to put up a fight as far as I go!’ This experience conflicts with the Vice-Chancellor’s call for lecturers to engage in innovation at Unisa (Makhanya 2014).
Supervisors

Self-efficacy is one of the factors that influence the success and throughput time of postgraduate students. Supervisors provide the premises for their students to construct meaning from their experiences and thus influence their self-efficacy (Manathunga 2007; Olivier 2007). In their portraits as students enrolled for doctoral degrees, both participants experienced their supervisors as dedicated as well as ‘a role model’ (Ingrid) and ‘a supporter’ (Vuyo). In both instances, these particular references were symbolic of the participant’s agency or lack thereof. Ingrid experienced the supervisory relationship as follows:

When we worked, we worked. She [the supervisor] is very precise. She knows a lot and would inquire about important authors that I had missed, or she would say: ‘But this connection is not quite correct’, or ‘Look at this’. And she has a quick turnover time.

During the second interview, after her doctorate had been submitted, Ingrid recounted:

Academically the journey was far from the family ... it was really my supervisor that accompanied me. I learnt so much from how she looked at things ... wider and more in detail ... and how to use language and the difference that one word could make. She never changed my work, we did everything together. She accompanied me to print and bind the thesis, as if she was a granny that helped to deliver a baby. It was an intimate relationship in that regard. She also supported me emotionally when times were tough, such as being alone and there was no one. She is wise and experienced and empathetic.

The supervisor’s personal overseeing of the implementation of improvements to the thesis reveals aspects of a ‘hierarchical apprenticeship’ (Manathunga 2007, 216). The supervisor also provided lots of pastoral care to Ingrid. Such caring relationships are particularly important for female students (Bitzer 2007; Johnson, Lee and Green 2000). However, Manathunga (2007) warns that supervisors can transgress boundaries when they get too involved with students personally. This can retard the development of a student’s self-efficacy.

After having obtained her doctorate, Ingrid indicated that the relationship with her supervisor changed into one of consultancy and teamwork. However, ‘she remains a source of wisdom and experience and gives advice based on her collective memory of what happened at the university a long ago with regard to certain issues’. Thus, her supervisor became her mentor. Manathunga (2007, 210) cautions that supervisors who act as mentors should be careful of academic self-reproduction with paternalistic qualities, in particular if a mentee assumes the role of ‘obedient and devoted apprentice’, which could be applicable to Ingrid.

In her self-portrait as student, Vuyo expressed her appreciation for her supportive supervisor as follows during the first interview:

I really don’t know if I would have been where I am without her support and guidance. I feel that she doesn’t treat me like I don’t know anything. She’s happy for me to suggest things
where I feel this is how I should proceed. She wouldn’t force me to do something that I don’t believe in. I really value her support very much.

Thus, the supervisor encouraged Vuyo to express her own views ‘because she valued my input as an individual and as an academic’. They co-authored an article and a conference paper which Vuyo experienced as ‘highlights’ and which could be liberating experiences.

**Mentors**

Professional development through mentoring facilitates the acquisition of an academic identity (Turner 2000). Mentoring relationships are more successful when mentees identify with the mentors’ conceptualisations of what it involves to be a researcher. In this way, the mentees adopt identities that are regarded highly by mentors and HEIs (Hall and Burns 2009), although this raises concerns about power relations, equity and agency.

In her portrait as a student, Ingrid referred to the emotional and practical support she obtained from colleagues. A colleague mentored her on practical research issues and she was ‘mentored’ in developing her own skills as a supervisor by helping an experienced colleague to assess the projects of fourth-year students. In her portrait as a newly doctored academic, Ingrid’s supervisor became her mentor and they planned to co-supervise students and co-author textbooks. Ingrid also progressed to having her own mentee. She expressed agency by requesting a senior manager at Unisa to mentor her during the implementation of a coaching programme for social work students at two other South African universities. Thus, she revealed the ability to promote herself (Jean-Marie and Brooks 2011), and to position herself in response to what she believed was needed (Chang et al. 2013).

Conversely, in her portrait as a doctored academic, Vuyo positioned herself as dependent and indicated a preference for being ‘acted upon’ (Manathunga 2007). During the final round of interviews, she expressed the need to be mentored by her husband and other colleagues: ‘They are always checking up on me, making sure I am writing articles and also suggesting journals where to send the articles when completed.’ Her erstwhile supervisor also mentored her in conference presentation:

> The first conference I attended she presented with me. She helped me to gain confidence to present because actually I am a very shy person. I had problems before ... speaking in public ... but she was there. She would do one section, I would do the other. And when it came to questions we would answer whatever questions we felt comfortable with.

During the third interview, Vuyo indicated that informal conversations with colleagues who were also friends were helpful and provided mutual support in their academic journeys. Such informal networks are fundamental to becoming integrated into academia (Turner 2000). Critical friends promote awareness and self-
development in relation to others because they can suggest alternative viewpoints on issues or confirm claims (Samaras and Roberts 2011). This has been referred to as reflexive *Ubuntu* (Harrison et al. 2012), where *Ubuntu* is seen as being warm and generous and willing to share.

**Female gender role: Power issues**

Culture can impact on how comfortable individuals are in hierarchical relationships (Manathunga 2007). As females, both participants positioned themselves in ‘traditional’ roles. Throughout her life, Ingrid served others and based her career decisions on the welfare of her family. For example, she enrolled for a degree in social work because her husband was a minister:

I argued that this degree would mean more to me as minister’s wife. His work required of us to move a lot and my career always came second. Only when my daughter was in Grade nine and I was employed at Unisa did I say: ‘I am not moving again. My children now need stability’.

She retracted a paper accepted for a conference in Uganda because her child was in Grade 12. After her husband was retrenched, she engaged in a heavy schedule of extra work to support the family and her studies took ‘a back seat’. Reflecting on the break-up of her marriage, Ingrid stated:

On a personal level it gave me a voice. I started to talk my own talk and I started to build a career and become financially independent. It [the divorce] empowered me on a personal level.

After obtaining her doctorate, her views of an academic still echoed her self-sacrifice indicated by the above paragraph:

I think an academic is someone that uses his or her knowledge to facilitate growth in others in their own contexts. I want to help others grow in social work. The theme of my doctorate was ‘student support’ and ‘life coaching’ which also focus on growth.

It has been argued that the view of autonomy (a central aim of doctoral scholarship), as free from emotions and human dependency, should be replaced by an appreciation of scholars who are sensitive to the concerns of others, willing to work with others, and able to make judgements based on context rather than on abstract, universal principles (Johnson et al. 2000). This statement was realised by Ingrid’s academic values as a lecturer.

Vuyo felt comfortable with her husband’s powerful position with regard to her academic career, in spite of her superior academic qualifications. The powerlessness of some black female academics and the tendency to depend on others, particularly on males, has also been identified by other authors (Schulze 2014). Vuyo viewed her husband as ‘far beyond what a doctoral degree offers’, stating:
I think the main problem for me was academic writing. So I relied a lot on my husband. He has been writing longer than me. I always give him what I’ve written so that he can see how he can make it more academic.

**Being and becoming a professional academic**

Academics’ insight into their own professional identities and learning experiences helps them to expand their identities and to create opportunities for meaningful experiences and development of their students (Karu and Krabi 2012). As doctored academics, the supervision of postgraduate students was expected of the participants. Unsurprisingly, this was experienced as a challenge (Johnston 1995; Wadee et al. 2010). During the third interview, Vuyo stated:

> At the moment I don’t think I am a competent supervisor. I still need a lot of mentoring as far as supervision is concerned. I don’t think that people who have just completed a doctorate should be allowed to supervise a doctoral student on their own. They are not experienced enough. Maybe they could co-supervise or wait a year or two. You should not be thrown in the deep-end immediately. Somebody has to hold your hand. But you are thrown into the lion’s den. I find that difficult.

HEIs view the training of academics in supervision as crucial (Bitzer 2007; Johnson et al. 2000). Although Vuyo had attended a training workshop in this regard, she believed that ‘you have to have someone to help you put theory into practice’. Ingrid showed greater confidence in her supervisory skills: she was supervising four master’s students at the time and felt she would be able to co-supervise (with her former supervisor) doctoral students the following year.

Academics may also have beliefs about their future identities that are influenced by self-efficacy and can have motivational value (Haamer et al. 2012). After having submitted her doctorate, Ingrid stated:

> Okay, what now? In what should I invest? How am I going to do it? I would need to look at funding. It is another ball game. It is now the afterlife of the doctorate. It is a new challenge ... the journey has not been completed. I want to sell my life coaching programme to my colleagues and the next step is to implement it.

In the final interview, Ingrid’s narrative revealed how she positioned herself with growing autonomy as an internalisation of authority (Johnson et al. 2000):

> A doctoral degree gives you voice. I have begun to play a stronger role in my department. I now have the time, the energy and perhaps, subconsciously, also the confidence. A while ago a colleague said to me: ‘I can see you talk with new authority.’ I have also begun to serve on more committees.

Ingrid planned to play a leading role in the development of new curricula in her department, and wanted to continue with research that was linked to teaching. The
importance of promoting the teaching-research nexus in universities of developing countries has been pointed out (Bitzer 2007).

After having had her doctorate for more than two years, Vuyo articulated her future plans during the second interview:

I am joining projects that already exist and that have been initiated by others. I don’t think I am at a stage where I can initiate a project. I think I am not experienced enough, so I have joined existing projects so that I could learn something from them.

Vuyo’s narrative also revealed the link between coping self-efficacy and the body’s immune function which is compromised by stress (Evans 1989):

Sometimes I feel that I’m under pressure and I have to do so much and then I realise I’m actually harming myself. So I would for a week or two do nothing. Last year it was actually for five months that my blood pressure was high. I couldn’t do anything.

Similar to the female academics in the Chang et al. (2013) study, Vuyo rejected some conventions of academia. During the third interview, she indicated that she would not attend any more writing workshops but would rather use a mentor to guide her with publications. She plans to retire at 60 (five years earlier than mandatory retirement) since she has found the expectations of academia too high:

People should be given enough time to become used to academic life. I do not feel ready to be pushed for promotion to associate professor. I need to be more involved with academic life. You will find that they come to your office and ask you to apply before you are ready.

CONCLUSION

Using a narrative research approach, the study explored the professional identity development of female academics longitudinally, before and after having obtained their doctoral degrees. Over a period of three and a half years, two female academics were interviewed several times, complemented by e-mail conversations. The study does not make claims towards generalisations of any kind since it is limited to only two participants. However, it is significant for providing greater insight into the professional academic identity development of female academics. Others may identify with many aspects of the participants’ stories.

The study presents three key findings. Firstly, obtaining a doctoral degree does not automatically facilitate a robust professional academic identity. Secondly, the study suggests areas to consider in supporting the professional identity development of females. At the relevant institution, training is provided for mentors and supervisors. However, greater consideration is needed of the role of management to create a stressful or a supportive environment for academics. Opportunities also need to be created for female academics to make sense of themselves in relation to
others and to academia by reflecting on their own gender roles and their professional identities. This may empower them in the construction of their professional academic identities. Thirdly, the research identified self-efficacy as a central concept to address. Supervisors and mentors play key roles in developing self-efficacy in other academics, and institutions can facilitate self-efficacy through the support they offer and by addressing important constraints. It is hoped that the current research will add to the debate of how the professional academic identity development of female academics may be enhanced.

REFERENCES


