



Career Competencies for Academic Career Progression: Experiences of Academics at a South African University

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An understanding of career competencies is critical for the progression of academic careers, as it influences the availability of adequate and capable academic staff at all levels within universities. The study aimed to explore and describe the career competencies that academics demonstrate to successfully progress in their careers, while theoretically underpinned by an integrated competency framework. This report is based on the qualitative experiences, gathered through semi-structured interviews of eight academic staff in various career phases, in a South African university. Data was thematically analysed, while a deductive modality was adopted to identify the competencies. The findings align very closely with the dimensions of the integrated competency framework, including reflective competencies: gap analysis, self-evaluation, social comparison, and goal orientation; communicative competencies: information seeking and negotiation; and behavioural competencies: strategy alignment, control and agency, university awareness, continuous learning and collaboration. Whilst the study did not include a comparative analysis, it is interesting to note that strategy alignment was the most commonly found competency, with negotiation only demonstrated by more senior academics. A career competency approach provides leaders and development practitioners in the higher education sector with factors to consider, as they attempt to understand holistic development for academic career progression. Moreover, how to assist and support the development of academic career progression. It offers academics a keen awareness, as a personal resource, to engage and navigate self-directed career management behaviour.

Keywords: career management, career competencies, academic career, career progression, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the career competencies for academic staff is critical for the progression of academic careers, as it influences the availability of adequate and capable academics at all levels within universities.

The South African university system is under enormous pressure to align its strategies and achieve the goals as set against the National Development Plan (2030) (Republic of South Africa [RSA], National Planning Commission [NPC], 2013, p. 319). The Department of Higher Education and

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Training (DHET), 2019, that the sector is experiencing severe challenges concerning the size, composition, and capacity of its academic staff (DHET, 2019). The DHET recognises that achieving the national higher education goals depends on the availability of adequate and capable academics at all university levels (DHET, 2019). The extent to which academics successfully and efficiently progress in their careers will address the transformation agenda and ageing workforce with a shrinking professoriate, not being replenished at the rates required to sustain the development of the higher education sector. It will support the improvements in higher education demanding greater levels of expertise from academics (Subbaye, 2018).

Scholars recognise that academic work occurs in a knowledge-intensive environment, with a high dependence on human capital where academic careers are globally found to be mostly self-initiated and self-managed (Baruch, 2013; Lewis, 2018; Tierney & Lanford, 2018). The concept of career self-management is identified as critical for the world of work in the twenty-first century (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019), while the focus on the responsibility and benefits of the individual to manage their career, is captured in a wide body of research (Strauss & Kelly, 2016; Callanan et al., 2017; Greenhaus et al., 2018; De Vos et al., 2019; Hirschi & Koen, 2021). Whilst South African universities are encouraged to adopt a proactive approach to support the career development of emerging scholars (Lesenyeho et al., 2018), particularly to achieve an equitable academic staff complement in terms of race and gender (Du Preez et al., 2016), individuals are generally expected to initiate and successfully navigate their careers through complex environments (Matsepe et al., 2020).

Support from both the South African government and universities have, however, increased significantly to ensure greater levels of expertise from academics to fill and increase the academic pipeline (DHET, 2019). This includes the implementation of programmes and funding models to unlock South Africa's research potential, while developing and cultivating the academic profession (CHE, 2016). A robust focus on the career progression of emerging academics is subsequently captured (Blokker et al., 2019), while experiences and strategies for career success of academics in their early careers, are well-documented (Hlengwa, 2019). Recent reviews confirm limited experiences and approaches captured of academics who successfully progressed during all career phases (Zacher et al., 2019; Barnes et al., 2021).

Career management is described as an ongoing process encompassing four broad interdependent phases (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). These phases include career planning requiring behaviour, such as goal setting, exploring options, and formulating plans. Resource mapping includes pursuing information, advice, or assistance from others, including building organisational relationships to obtain career-related information. Skill development includes behaviours leading to task mastery. Finally, monitoring goal progress, action, and plans, which include behaviour building networks to pursue information, advice, or feedback.

Considering the summarised four phases, literature identifies two broad theoretical models, including process models and content models, that aim to postulate the main cognitive and

behavioural components of career management and how these components are related. These models provide the way people observe and approach their careers, as assumed to be the driving force behind their career management behaviour. The models further outline how various attitudinal and behavioural aspects are linked to promoting successful career management (Hirschi & Koen, 2021).

Process models posit that self-knowledge and the progression of diverse career behaviours, including goal commitment, lead to desired career outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2013). Content models aim to identify key cognitive and behavioural factors important for successful career management. The emphasis of content models is on the competencies individuals need to build and maintain, while employing a range of personal and environmental resources through engagement in various proactive career behaviours (Strauss et al., 2012). Scholars agree on the importance of career competencies for predicting various forms of career success, including career progression (Blokker et al., 2019; Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020).

Career competencies are described as essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to deliver the desired career development outcomes (Skakni et al., 2020). They are learnt capabilities resulting in the effective performance of individual career management (Mulhall & Campbell, 2018). It is emphasised that career competencies do not focus on personality; they do not include characteristics, such as motives, traits, and aspects of the individual's self-image. In addition, career competencies are not directly related to the job or limited to job-related abilities; however, considers the entire career (Presti et al., 2021). Career competencies aim to provide a general taxonomy of the behaviours, vital to achieving the desired career-related outcomes (Coetzee & Schreuder, 2018) and therefore the fundamental function of career competencies is to foster career development and advancement (Skakni et al., 2020).

Akkermans et al. (2013) offer an integrative career competency framework, underpinned by four career perspectives that identify the respective competencies necessary for successfully career management. These perspectives include the boundaryless career perspective, the protean career perspective, the career self-management perspective, and the human capital perspective as summarised in **Table 1**. This integrative career competency framework captures the overarching views of these four perspectives and identifies three main competency dimensions. These three dimension are reflective, communicative, and behavioural career competencies, while further identifying two specific competencies in each dimension. Reflective career competencies focus on creating an awareness of one's long-term career and on combining personal reflections and one's professional career. The two career competencies derived from this dimension are reflection on motivation, referred to as reflecting on values, passions, and motivations with regard to one's personal career; and reflection on qualities, referred to as reflecting on strengths, shortcomings, and skills with regard to one's personal career. Communicative competencies pertain to being able to effectively communicate with significant others to improve chances of career success. The two communicative

TABLE 1 | Integration of four perspectives on career competencies in three overarching categories (Akkermans et al., 2013).

	Reflective competencies	Communicative competencies	Behavioural competencies
Boundaryless career Perspective	<i>Knowing why</i> Career insight Openness to experience Proactive personality	<i>Knowing whom</i> Experience in mentoring relations Extensiveness of networks	<i>Knowing how</i> Career identity Career-related skills
Protean career Perspective	<i>Self-knowledge skills</i> Self-assessment Self-awareness Modifying self-perceptions	<i>Interpersonal knowledge skills</i> Assertiveness Conflict management Dialogue skills and effective listening Influencing others Seeking out relationships Developmental feedback seeking	<i>Environmental knowledge skills</i> Adapting to changing environment Exploration Flexibility Time and stress management
Career self-management Perspective	<i>Cognitive component</i> Career insight Formulating plans	Influence behaviours Networking Seeking career guidance Self-nomination	<i>Behavioural component</i> Boundary management Career planning Creating opportunities Job mobility preparedness Positioning behaviour
Human capital Perspective	<i>Reflective behaviours</i> Career reflection Reflection on motives Reflection on capacities	<i>Interactive behaviours</i> Networking Self-presentation	<i>Proactive behaviours</i> Career actualization ability Career development ability Career control Work exploration

career competencies are networking, referred to as the awareness of the presence and professional value of an individual network, and the ability to expand this network for career-related purposes; and self-profiling, referred to presenting and communicating personal knowledge, abilities and skills to the internal and external labour market. Behavioural competencies focus on being able to actually shape one's career by proactively taking action. The two career competencies derived from this dimension are work exploration, referred to as actively exploring and searching for work-related and career-related opportunities on the internal and external labour market; and career control, referred to as actively influencing learning processes and work processes related to one's personal career by setting goals and planning how to fulfil them. While this integrative framework, including the six career competencies was adopted as the theoretical guide for this study, it is important to note that the focus of the framework was explicitly on individuals in an early career phase (Akkermans et al., 2013). The framework was further employed during a recent study to assess the career competencies amongst early career researchers (Skakni et al., 2020).

With national pressure to ensure adequate and capable academic staff at all levels within universities, while academics are expected to develop effective career competencies for successful career progression, literature indicates:

- 1) Limited research captured on the experiences and approaches of academics, who successfully progressed during all career phases (Zacher et al., 2019; Barnes et al., 2021); and
- 2) The study of career competencies remains under-explored (Skakni et al., 2020).

This study therefore aimed to explore and describe the career competencies academics demonstrate to successfully progress in their careers, by including academics in all career phases.

TABLE 2 | Hierarchy of academic ranks.

Rank	Promoted to
Associate Lecturer	Lecturer
Lecturer	Senior Lecturer
Senior Lecturer	Associate Professor
Associate Professor	Professor

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

This study embodied a constructivist worldview, holding knowledge as multiple or relative truths, as individuals attempt to comprehend the world where they live (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative research approach was adopted to address the following research question:

What career competencies do academics demonstrate to successfully progress in their academic career?

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a public university in South Africa, classified as a previously disadvantaged institution. The university is challenged to demonstrate that it can compete with the best, with a prominent role in the intellectual, social and economic life of the nation. The target population included full-time academic staff, employed at the university on a permanent contract during the 2020 academic year. These employees were successfully promoted during the 2019 academic promotion process. The hierarchy of promotion ranks for academic staff is outlined in **Table 2**.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit the participants for the study. Data saturation was reached, following the semi-structured interviews of eight academics (**Table 3**).

TABLE 3 | Study participants.

Participant code	Gender	Age	Promotion rank	Faculty
P1	Male	33 years	Associate Lecturer to Lecturer	Community and Health Sciences
P2	Female	42 years	Lecturer to Senior Lecturer	Community and Health Sciences
P3	Female	40 years	Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor	Economic and Management Sciences
P4	Male	36 years	Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor	Economic and Management Sciences
P5	Male	59 years	Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor	Economic and Management Sciences
P6	Male	56 years	Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor	Law
P7	Male	37 years	Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor	Natural Sciences
P8	Male	47 years	Associate Professor to Professor	Community and Health Sciences

Predetermined data saturation criteria included a minimum of six interviews and two further consecutive interviews with no new themes, as guided by the data saturation principle with the ability to obtain additional information (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

The exploratory nature of the study allowed employing an open-ended interview guide to conduct the semi-structured interviews with the participants. The same open-ended questions could be posed to all the participants, while still allowing them to elaborate on their responses. In addition, it allowed probing for further clarity, while remaining focused to investigate the objectives of the study. The challenge of such an instrument is that it is time-consuming, conducting each interview, and transcribing and coding the data. All the interviews were conducted virtually, through an online platform. The interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants' permission.

This data-collection method was employed attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing protocols, at the time of data collection. All the participants were provided with a summary of the research process requirements, and detailed elements of consent and confidentiality, before the scheduled interview. Elements of consent were discussed and audio-recorded, while an opportunity was provided to deal with questions before the interviews.

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 et al., 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. An important step in analysing and organising qualitative data is the ability to identify and assign codes, or labels, to express or infer information, gathered during the study (Basit, 2003). The authors analysed the data by identifying and assigning codes to the knowledge, skills and abilities most often brought up and discussed during the semi-structured interviews. These codes were then ordered into probable themes to generate a reasonable thematic map, in which the potential competencies were identified.

Subsequently, the potential themes were reviewed by the researchers, respectively, by checking them in relation to the

coded extracts of the entire data set (Clarke et al., 2015) and moreover, for potential overlap and clarity. A few changes were then discussed amongst the researchers and affected following their consensus, 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, while the themes were defined, and names assigned, to ensure conceptual clarity of each theme (competency).

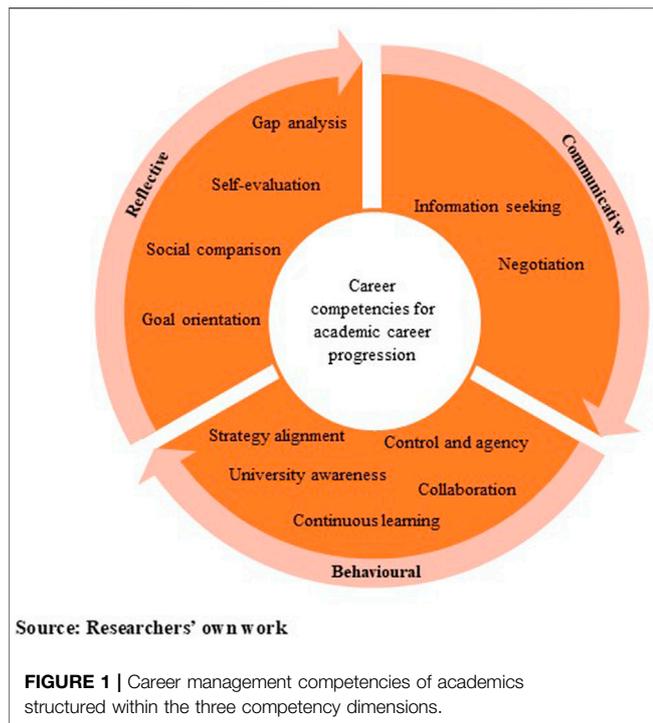
As a follow-up step, the researchers categorised the competencies in line with the three integrative dimensions, including reflective, communicative, and behavioural competencies to provide a roadmap for the final step, namely the writing-up of the results to report on this current study. During the 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).

Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were considered, to ensure the quality and integrity of the qualitative nature of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Credibility considered the confidence that could be placed in the truth of the research findings, and that the research findings represented plausible information and interpretation drawn from the participants' original data (Macnee & McCabe, 2008). *Author*^{1*} established credibility through the consultation and scholarly guidance of two experienced researchers, *Author*¹ and *Author*², as a way of peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is described as an opportunity for researchers to assess their developing insights while exposed to searching questions (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Consequently, an overview of background information, data collections methods and processes, data management, and transcriptions, with data analysis procedures and research findings, were discussed (Pitney & Parker, 2009). *Author*^{1*} kept a journal throughout the research process, to create an opportunity for reflexivity, by that minimising researcher bias (Malterud, 2001).

Transferability considered the degree to which the research methods and findings could be transferred to another research setting (Bitsch, 2005). The researchers, therefore, provide a comprehensive description of the research methodology and context, while purposively selecting the participants. Dependability considered the stability of the findings over



time (Bitsch, 2005), which could be achieved through the available audit trail for future research. This includes the raw data, including the audio-recorded interviews and interview notes (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Confirmability considered the degree to which the results of an inquiry could be confirmed, or corroborated by other researchers (Eyles & Baxter, 2016). The audit trail also established the confirmability of the study (Cope, 2014). This study obtained ethical clearance from the Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (ref: HS19/6/41) of the respective university.

FINDINGS

The findings emerged from the purpose of the study to explore and describe the career competencies academics demonstrate to successfully progress in their academic careers. Thematic analysis was performed on the full data set. Emphasis was on the content of the text, and not the manner the participants responded to the questions, to identify, analyse, and report on the patterns (themes) in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A deductive modality was adopted, underpinned by the integrative career competency framework (Akkermans et al., 2013), to categorise the themes (competencies). A diagram was employed to present the following themes as it emerged within the three competency dimensions, as illustrated in **Figure 1**:

Reflective Competencies

Four competencies were thematically identified as a focus to create awareness of one's long-term career goals and aligning personal reflections and one's professional career, including

gap analysis, self-evaluation, social comparison and goal orientation.

Gap Analysis

Participants identified the need for them to continuously determine their areas for development concerning their professional knowledge or skill as an academic, as part of managing their careers. Participant P7 shared "The first thing I did when I considered the application for promotion was to confirm what separates an associate professor from a senior lecturer". Establishing the criteria for the consecutive rank allowed the participant to do a gap analysis, as stated, "I could then determine my areas for development".

Participant P3 demonstrated the ability to determine ideal performance concerning actual performance by sharing:

I created a grid from all the different promotion criteria, and that gave me a much better idea of what is required in the different phases. I did a gap analysis to see what areas I am really good at, what areas do I have big gaps in.

Self-knowledge is identified as a prerequisite for successful career development (Greenhaus et al., 2018). The observation that an accurate perception and understanding of individual strengths and areas for development supports this finding, enabling an individual to set appropriate career goals (Donald et al., 2019).

Self-Evaluation

Participants demonstrated the ability to continuously reflect on their progress and evaluate their growth concerning the identified divergences to attain their career goals. Participant P6 shared "I think some colleagues make the mistake sometimes to go for the minimum requirement. I aim to operate at the next level and evaluate myself accordingly". Participant P4 also expressed "my involvement with the professional body and projects in the community also helped me to reflect and assess myself".

There is agreement that self-understanding, through the evaluation of goals, strengths, challenges, and progress, provide a platform for self-regulation and action (Jiang et al., 2017). This finding aligns with the argument that individual reflection and evaluation of career management behaviour is crucial for future career success (Tims & Akkermans, 2017).

Social Comparison

An ability to evaluate their attitudes, abilities, and traits in comparison with peers, was demonstrated by participants as an approach to further reflect on their career progress. Participant P6 expressed social comparison in the following excerpt:

About ten years ago, my faculty had an exchange programme with (participant mentions a partner university) and then some of us went there for like three weeks and they would come to us for three weeks . . . and in your area of expertise, you would teach, and they would do the same. I was fortunate and it was essential for my growth to compare and see what others are doing.

Participant P3 Shared

I reached out to my contacts at other universities in South Africa and asked them to send me their university's promotion criteria ... and that helped me to draw up a grid to see what are the typical things that would be considered for promotion to associate professor and to full professor. It was important for me to benchmark with criteria across different universities.

The social comparison theory supports this finding in that individuals compare themselves to peers and a considerable influence on career decision-making (Li et al., 2015).

Goal Orientation

Participants identified a drive to stay focused on the efforts to achieve their career goals while working persistently to overcome obstacles. Participant P8 shared:

I continue to apply myself to whatever level I am and believe that if you are intentional about your work then you should move forward towards a promotion, even in the most intimidating environment. [P8 continued] ... when setting my goal, there's always a need and energy to pursue that, and the drive to continue going forward in spite of what is happening around me.

Participant P3 further demonstrated an orientation and focus on the goal as shared, "I took on my part that was expected by the department and more. I took on other tasks, but it was my choice". In addition, participant P2 said "I was mindful of balancing my actual teaching, clinical supervision, research and taking on a mundane task that actually didn't form part of the plan".

This finding aligns with consistent research in organisational behaviour literature, indicating that employees, committed to their career goals, outperform those lacking goals or commitment (Greenhaus et al., 2018). It confirms that the advantage of goal orientation includes the ability to direct and regulate career efforts in a focused manner (Zacher et al., 2016).

Communicative Competencies

Two competencies pertaining to the ability to network professionally and to effectively promote oneself in a professional contexts, were thematically identified namely, information seeking and negotiation.

Information Seeking

Participants demonstrated the ability to seek information, advice, or assistance from others to obtain career-related information. Participant P1 shared:

... so, for me it was to find out what was needed, so I went to a couple of senior lecturers and then they advised, this is what you need to do to get to the next level. My career was a bit of a lonely journey

initially, but once I started talking to people and experts in the field, I gained more knowledge, but it also built my confidence.

Information seeking was further expressed by Participant P3 in the following excerpt:

I had professional guidance on how to complete and present my portfolio and I think it really improved what I did. Now that came at a fee and I paid for it personally, and I'm sure that not everybody is able to do that ... best as one can, find somebody in the institution who can support you with the actual application process for promotion.

This finding aligns with the argument that career management depends on the engagement of informed choices and, therefore, pursuing career-related information is critical (Puah & Ananthram, 2006).

Negotiation

Participants identified the need for effective engagement to gain support and acceptance from other parties, by exploring alternatives and options to reach goals, as expressed by Participant P3 in the following excerpt:

I was over on the one hand but needed to up certain areas for the associate professor requirements. As an example, let's say I needed to supervise ten Masters' students, but by that time I had already supervised twenty-five. So, I negotiated as much as I could with the department for time, to help me give better attention to other areas.

A study among academics in medical research supports this finding, identifying negotiation as an important element for career development (Berman & Gottlieb, 2019).

Behavioural Competencies

Five behavioural competencies that focus on being able to shape one's career by proactively taking action were thematically identified. This includes strategy alignment, control and agency, university awareness, continuous learning, and collaboration.

Strategy Alignment

Most participants, including P1, P2, P3, P4, P6 and P7, attributed the development of a clear strategy as an essential success factor for their promotions. Participant P3 shared:

I steer my academic growth strategically; part of how I do things in life is I always aim one goal further and I've always tried to be two steps ahead; so, I was working towards being a full professor last year, and the associate professor is kind of like the first step.

The participant continued with an example of her ability to align her strategy early in her career when:

I funded my first international conference from my pocket. I could've used that money for something completely different, but I understood from what people told me how important it is to go

to international conferences and to see the level of work that's been done there.

Participant P4 echoed strategy alignment, stating, 'every initiative or action should add value to the bigger picture—you need an end goal, and each action should form part of the strategy'. Participant P4 continued with the following example:

My strategy is a complete restructure of my supervision. I make sure that the supervision of master's students is aligned with the intention of publication. The structure of the mini-thesis should deliver some publication. Working on a bigger project and working smarter is important. The conversion rate might be longer but will ensure considerable and strategic output.

Two participants further acknowledged the role of strategy alignment, indicating their initial challenge with successful promotion was the lack of a clear goal and strategy. Participant P1 said:

This was my second application ... with my first unsuccessful application I was not clear on how to go about. My mistake was that there was really no plan with the first application.

While it was the first promotion process for Participant P2, the decision to apply for promotion was delayed as, "I first needed to devise a sustainable plan, considering my workload and other responsibilities". Participant P2 further shared her learning about strategy alignment as follows:

... as soon as I was clear about my goal and plan, I could better manage my strategy to get there; I applied for a fellowship, and I knew I was going to kill myself but did it knowing that it will add value for my promotion.

This behaviour demonstrates the participants' ability to clarify their desired career goals while identifying key courses of action and milestones concerning their individual context, access, and limitations to resources, to evaluate and continuously monitor their goal achievement. The term "strategy" is, therefore, employed to demonstrate deliberation and selection among career decision-making alternatives (Greenhaus et al., 2018).

Control and Agency

Participants demonstrated their ability to act independently, through planning their career goals without having to be prompted, while originating meaningful action to achieve goals beyond what is required and active attempts to influence events to achieve their goals. Participant P7 shared:

I knew early in my career, that I need to align myself to the goals of the university. When the requirements for promotion was not clear, I took the institutional operating plan, considered the university's goals for teaching, research, community engagement and the administration pillar, and tried to build my portfolio around those areas.

Participant P2 further expressed her ability to control her choices by expressing, "I am ready to plan my next promotion".

This finding aligns with the observation of the individual as central to the career management process, with the primary responsibility, while the role of the employer is supportive (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Individuals are further encouraged to take control of their careers, especially in an unpredictable and rapidly changing world of work (Mulhall & Campbell, 2018).

University Awareness

Participants demonstrated the ability to use knowledge of formal and informal systems, situations, procedures, and culture inside the university to identify potential opportunities for career development. Participant P1 shared:

The professionalisation training the university offers was absolutely amazing. I learnt so much and benefitted from it. We have now created a WhatsApp group and share information ... notices about calls for abstracts ... or to find out who is interested in collaboration.

Participant P1 also expressed "it's a much more enjoyable journey. I think I understand the processes better, the people more, the culture, the environment much better".

Participants further perceived the influence and implications of decisions on the university, while having and using knowledge of the university context to identify potential challenges and opportunities. Participant P8 shared:

So, when you are able to kind of create synergy between your goals and the university's goals, then you find that you are moving forward and the university is moving forward, but in the same sense the university is rewarding you with positive feedback, as your outcomes are also moving the university forward.

A deep awareness of the immediate work environment can assist individuals to formulate realistic goals and allow strategy development to accomplish significant career goals (Greenhaus et al., 2018).

Continuous Learning

Participants demonstrated their ability to actively identify new areas for learning, proactively taking advantage of opportunities to gain experience and keep up with developments in areas of expertise.

Participant P6 shared "I am always open to co-writing articles and co-supervising because it gives me access to a skill and to learn from others". The need for continuous development was further identified, as Participant P4 indicated "I have also been involved with community service, which doesn't carry much weight, but helps me grow as a professional".

Continuous growth and learning were also emphasised at the start of an interview when Participant P3 shared "it wasn't specifically about the promotion, but it's always rather been about my academic growth. To be promoted as a result is wonderful, but my intention is to grow as a scholar". The following excerpt demonstrates the willingness of Participant P3 to proactively take advantage of opportunities to gain experience:

I willingly offered to assist. So sometimes it would've been to offer to be a co-supervisor, but sometimes it was to offer and say

you know what, can I review it (referring to an article) for you just as a critical reader, just to get exposure and to help people see that I don't want a free ride. I'm willing to put in what is necessary to grow.

This finding is supported by the Canadian standards and guidelines for career development, defining career management as “the process of managing learning, training, and work throughout the life span” (Neault, 2002, p. 10). The finding aligns with literature, identifying career-related continuous learning as “an individual-level process of self-initiated, discretionary, planned, and proactive pattern of (...) activities that are sustained over time for the purpose of (...) career development” (London, 2011, p. 4). It includes formal ways of learning such as workshops and training and identifies challenging job assignments and discussing innovative ideas with colleagues as informal ways of learning for continuous career development.

Collaboration

Participants demonstrated the ability to identify opportunities and take action to build partnerships and collaborate with other areas, teams, units, departments, or faculties, to achieve their career goals. Participant P6 shared “I have been fortunate to co-write articles with a few colleagues”, while participant P3 indicated “I recognised that this kind of academic journey, you can't just do on your own”.

Participants further expressed the necessity to take action that respects the needs and contributions of others. Participant P3 continued to identify efforts to collaborate and build relations by sharing “I willingly offered my strengths to assist. So sometimes it was just to help with the editing of an article, and I didn't want to be an author”.

Collaboration in higher education has grown significantly in many forms, in the last century, including research and scholarship among academics (Newell & Bain, 2020). While several reasons and benefits are identified for successful collaborative arrangements, these findings align to the notion that collaboration offers a source of support to improve performance, maximise potential, and achieve the goals that attracted many to the academic profession (Pham & Tanner, 2015). The social exchange theory supports this concept (Dahling et al., 2017).

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore and describe the career competencies that academics demonstrate to successfully progress in their academic careers. With the three integrative career competency dimensions in mind, including reflective, communicative and behavioural competencies (Akkermans et al., 2013), the study identified eleven career competencies: gap analysis, self-evaluation, social comparison, goal orientation, information seeking, negotiation, strategy alignment, control and agency, university awareness, collaboration, and continuous learning.

With reflective competencies including *reflection on motivation* and *reflection on qualities* (Akkermans et al., 2013),

the participants of this study clearly demonstrated their ability to reflect on their qualities including their strengths, areas for development, and the skills required for their academic roles. However, no clear indication of their reflection on career motivation, was demonstrated. An important factor to consider is that the participants of this study include academics in all career phases, while the focus of the integrated career competency framework was explicitly on individuals in an early career phase and the competency found evident amongst an assessment of competencies amongst early career researchers (Skakni et al., 2020). This variance in the finding amongst early career researchers and academics in all career phases of this study, can be attributed to a fundamental notion of career development theories in that each career stage or phase poses a unique set of tasks and challenges (Greenhaus et al., 2018).

With communicative career competencies encompassing *networking* and *self-profiling*, (Akkermans et al., 2013), this study identifies information seeking and negotiation in particular. While the information seeking competency identified during this study is closely linked to the networking competency of the integrative framework, as demonstrated by participants as their active engagement with colleagues, it is important to note the difference in the negotiation and the self-profiling competencies. This study finds academics not only presenting and communicating their knowledge, abilities and skills to internal stakeholders, but requires a deeper level of engagement that entails the articulation of alternatives and options to influence and gain support or acceptance from internal stakeholders, namely negotiation. Whilst the study did not include a comparative analysis, it is interesting to note that the negotiation competency was particularly found amongst the more senior academics, including academics who progressed from senior lecturer to associate professor level, as well as the associate professor to professor level. This differentiation in the level of communicative competency aligns with a fundamental principle of competency frameworks that it should be highly tailored to the role and positional level (Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014).

The behavioural competencies identified in this study, including strategy alignment, control and agency, university awareness and continuous learning, aligns closely with the integrative career competencies of *work exploration* and *career control* (Akkermans et al., 2013). The collaboration competency identified in this study, however, stands out and accordingly worth noting. With a significant growth of collaboration in many forms in higher education, in the last century, 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, 2020). However, this study is supported by the notion that there is a complex matrix of personal, professional and social or cognitive factors to be considered (Macfarlane, 2017). This study identifies collaboration as a career competency by demonstrating the willingness of academics to collaborate, together with their understanding of shared goal or mutual career benefit, allowing them to identify efficient strategies and adopt work-related

behaviours to engage and meet the criteria for successful promotion. Another behavioural competency worth noting is strategy alignment as the most commonly found amongst the participants of this study. The deliberation and selection of career decision-making alternatives is identified as a critical first step for successful career management. (Greenhaus et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides insights into the career competencies of academics, in all career phases, who successfully progressed in their careers by demonstrating their self-directed behaviours and adopted strategies. These career competencies are categorised in terms of reflective competencies: gap analysis, self-evaluation, social comparison and goal orientation; communicative competencies: information seeking and negotiation; and behavioural competencies: strategy alignment, control and agency, university awareness, continuous learning and collaboration.

The findings contribute to an under-explored career competency approach (Jackson & Wilton, 2016) and moreover, academic career competencies for successful career progression (Skakni et al., 2020). The study provides higher education stakeholders, with a framework to consider how academics in all career phases could be assisted in the development of their careers. Simultaneously, it offers leaders and development practitioners in the higher education sector with factors to consider, as they attempt to understand holistic development for the career progression of academics (Sutherland, 2018).

A competency-based approach typically creates a consciousness of an individual's behaviour (Blokker et al., 2019) and therefore, this study proves academics with a keen awareness, as a personal resource, to engage and navigate self-directed career management behaviour.

Whilst the study did not include a comparative analysis, and the competencies identified in this study are all closely aligned to the integrative competency model, it is interesting to note the level of competency variances in this study as it reiterates the need for a bespoke approach when considering the career progression of academics in various career phases (Callaghan, 2015). Negotiation was particularly demonstrated by more senior academics, including senior lecturer to associate level, as well as the associate professor to professor level. It is further

interesting to note that strategy alignment is the most commonly found competency amongst the participants of this study. Future studies could therefore further investigate the differential underpinnings in support of a bespoke approach.

The study acknowledges that individual findings cannot be extended to the broader research community with the same degree of certainty, as the primary limitation of a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 1994). It does, however, allow considering adapted interventions and institutional strategy alignment to support individual career management needs of academics. A career competency approach will therefore allow a collaborative effort from academics and higher education institutions to work towards the successful management and progression of academic careers.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (ref: HS19/6/41) of the respective university. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors made a substantial contribution to the conception and design of the study, together with the analysis and interpretation of the data. NB drafted the manuscript, MdP and JF critically revised it for important content. All authors approved the final version for submission of the manuscript.

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