



## **Understanding academic identity development in a changing landscape: The case of university English teachers in Malaysia**

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The changing landscape of higher education (HE) and the expansion of academic work have impacted on academic identity development. However, there is very little known about the academic identity development of English language teachers who transition from teaching in the school sector to working in higher learning institutions in Malaysia. This paper thus seeks to explore how university English teachers' (UET) academic identities are developed and to identify factors that are pertinent to this development through the lens of self-concept. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews and the analysis was done using the framework of self-concept. The findings reveal that UETs' self-concepts are dynamic constructs influenced by multiple internal and external factors from their past and present contexts. When UETs were placed into a new setting, they had to reflect on and re-evaluate their abilities in order to adapt to internal and situational changes. Self-concept thus played a role in restructuring the self and is strongly associated with motivation and is driven by goals for self-improvement. The findings of this study suggest that strategies which can support and sustain a positive transition for UETs into academia be implemented to ensure improved recruitment and retention.

**Keywords:** academic identity, identity development, university, English language teachers, self-concept

### **Introduction**

Academic careers are complex and dynamic. According to Kaulisch and Enders (2005), the academic career is distinct from conventional hierarchical, bureaucratic models. In fact, traditional academic career systems have features that reflect characteristics of a more traditional career model, such as 'tenure' and a fairly rigid career hierarchy. Traditionally, universities were perceived as organisations that emphasise the dominant role of academics as the most important locus of power and control (Berdahl, 1990), giving them autonomy and academic freedom in their practice (Santos, 2016).

Nonetheless, global changes in higher education (HE) have had a profound impact on the nature of the profession (Sutton, 2015). The changes, which were brought about by the requirements of the knowledge society and various political and economic constraints (Castelló et al., 2015), have resulted in increasingly measured universities and intensification of academic work (Neary & Winn, 2016). This is evident in the vision, policy, and governance of higher learning institutions (Altbach, 2004).

Malaysian HE is also impacted by changing market needs (Sirat, 2010). To illustrate, with strong

intention to enhance the global competitiveness of their university system, Malaysia's government has introduced reforms whereby ideas and practices are embedded in neo-liberalism, evidenced by the processes of marketization, decentralisation, and privatisation (Wan et al., 2016). Consequently, performance driven initiatives are increasingly evident, whereby "autonomy, audit and apex universities" (Mokhtar, 2010, p. 429) are shaping HE management in Malaysia.

As a result, many academics feel more pressure from the university administration and government ministries (Mok, 2010). Such pressures are further exacerbated by the expectations placed on higher learning institutions to fulfil the national goals of "training the people necessary for the academic as well as the manpower needs of the nation" (Higher Educational Institutions Act, 1996, as cited in Foo & Richards, 2004, p. 238). These changes in HE have been reported to impact academic identity (Henkel, 2005; Huang, Pang, & Yu, 2016).

It is within this contentious and demanding context that English language teachers, who transition from teaching in the school sector to working in universities, undergo identity construction while they enter academia<sup>1</sup> as early career academics<sup>2</sup> (ECA). Unlike new academics who enter HE with high levels of knowledge in their subjects or disciplines, typically gained from a PhD, university English teachers (UET) tend to have considerable teaching experience in the school sector. This is often a major reason for their recruitment in HE. Nonetheless, this does not mean knowledge and understanding of teaching acquired in the schools can be seamlessly transferred to the HE context. Being new members to the new academic community, UETs may resist certain dominant structures and practices. In fact, Archer (2008) maintains that the challenge lies in finding a balance between structural and institutional positioning and between individuality and conformity. Insecurities associated with novice researcher status can also shape the formation of academic identities (Remmik, Karm, Haamer, & Lepp, 2011).

Although not documented in empirical studies, the number of UETs transitioning into HE in Malaysia is on the rise. Reasons for leaving the school sector include job dissatisfaction, a lack of academic freedom, and insufficient professional development courses (Jusoh, 2012). While UETs have received training in teaching and are experts in their discipline (English language), transitioning from one educational context to another means that certain pedagogical approaches may have to shift to suit the new context (Avalos & Bascopé, 2014). In fact, in the Malaysian context, questions have been raised regarding the effectiveness of teacher education and how it does not reflect the reality of the current educational context (Goh & Blake, 2015).

Despite the significant changes happening in HE in Malaysia, little is known about this under researched population and how they navigate the transition into HE. Thus, this paper's rationale is twofold. First, studies on the difficulty for teachers in establishing their identity following the move from schools to university is well-documented (see Harrison & McKeon, 2008; Murray, 2005). Within this literature, however, there is very little empirical research on academic identity development of UETs who transition into HE in Malaysia. Second, although studies focusing on identity development have grown exponentially in recent years, we often do not understand how these cues are negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed at the personal and individual level. This study aims to fill this gap. For this reason, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How do UETs' develop academic identities?
2. What factors impact the development of UETs' academic identities in the HE setting?
3. What role does self-concept play in the formulation of academic identity?

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<sup>1</sup> Note that due to privatisation of higher learning, the medium of instruction at tertiary level in Malaysia is English (Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf Jr, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> Early career academics (ECAs) are defined as being "within their first five years of having been appointed to their first academic position, under a sessional, part-time or full-time load" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 171).

## Literature Review

### Understanding the Development of Academic Identity through Self-concept

Self-concept refers to self-knowledge and perceptions about one's own ability (Marsh & Martin, 2011). The knowledge about the self is formed through experience with and interpretations of his or her environment. They are influenced especially by evaluations by significant others, reinforcements and attributions for the individual's own behaviour (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Therefore, self-concept includes individuals' self-descriptions of competence and evaluative feelings about themselves.

Self-concept consist of the *personal self* and the *social self*, where the personal self is defined as a person's sense of unique identity, often differentiated from others (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004). On the other hand, the social self has been understood as "a sense of self as connected to the others" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The social self is often discussed in tandem with social categories (e.g., ethnicity or gender) and social roles. Thus, self-concept can be simultaneously personal and social. This study perceives identity as the collective aspects of the social and personal self.

Self-concept is responsive to context. Hormuth (1990) postulates that self-concept is a dynamic construct and susceptible to change. He proposes that the notion *ecology of self*, in which people, environments, and objects "serve as the sources and setting, instrument and symbols of social experience" (p. 1). Powell (2009) further clarifies this and maintains that "the changing environment encourages self-evaluation since each individual must adapt to changes in order to succeed" (p. 32). This ecological perspective is important because UETs construct their self-concepts based on the cues they receive from their environment, specifically in the HE context.

Self-concept is hierarchical in nature (Shavelson et al., 1976). 'Hierarchy' indicates levels of importance and suggests that some self-concepts are more central, while others are more peripheral. Consequently, academics that started their careers as UETs before joining academia may have multiple self-concepts shaping their identity (e.g., self-concept as UET, as a researcher, and as an early career academic). According to Turner and Onorato (2004), central self-concepts tend to be enduring in nature, while the peripheral self relates to a self-concept that is more receptive to change. In fact, Korte (2007) maintains that "the flexibility of the peripheral self allows the individual to adapt to various social situations and adopt various roles and group identities" (p. 168). Note also that when self-concept has been formed early, it may be less susceptible to change (Badiozaman, 2015). This conceptualization implies that academic identity is constructed through a recursive and iterative process (McNaughton & Billot, 2016).

This framework also proposes the importance of self-efficacy in understanding the development of academic identity. Self-efficacy, which involves "perceived confidence about successfully performing a given academic task" (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 10), is dependent on the experience (success or failure) and exposure to the relevant task. Bandura (1977) maintained that beliefs in capabilities could mobilise motivation and cognitive resources and determine courses of action. The current study acknowledges the contribution of self-efficacy research and perceives that both self-concept and self-efficacy may have an important mediating role (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2002) in that they illuminate the link between thoughts and actions. In this study, self-concept is perceived as a general and more dominant self-construct, while self-efficacy is just one subset within this construct.

The notion of *possible selves*, which emphasizes a future orientation of the self, is also important in the discussion of identity development. This notion was first proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986), who postulated that all individuals possessed many possible selves. They elaborated on the notion of possible selves as representing individuals' ideals of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. Possible selves, which hold multiple roles, may provide incentives and a context of meaning for the now self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Since the systems of affective-cognitive schema regulate individual behavior, potent motivators of self-concept may help elucidate the link between self-concept and actions.

Ultimately, a person's self-concept is his knowledge about himself. Therefore, the notion of self-concept is proposed to better understand the development of academic identity.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

Data for this study were taken from a larger project which investigated the academic trajectory of early career academics. Participants were initially identified by searches of department web sites. Individuals were contacted via email with an attached contact letter explaining the study in detail. Seven academics out of twelve agreed to be interviewed. For the purpose of this paper, data were drawn only from Malaysian UETs who have transitioned from teaching in school sectors into higher learning institutions. ECAs who entered the institution after completing their PhDs were excluded. The interview data were analysed using the framework of self-concept, then three cases of identity stories were prepared.

### Data Analysis

An interpretive perspective, drawn from interview data, frames the analysis. The overarching purpose of the paper is to understand UETs' academic identity development through the lens of self-concept and its unique interactions within the environment. The findings will be illustrated through three identity stories.

The participants (see Table 1) held lecturing positions across a range of academic levels, from preparatory to undergraduate studies. Two participants held bachelor degrees, but were in the final stages of completing research master's degrees. The other participant held a master's degree in TESOL done by coursework.

TABLE 1  
*Gender, Years of Tertiary Teaching Experience, and Qualifications of Participants*

UET	Gender	Teaching Experience	Bachelor's degree	Highest Qualification	Position	Program Level
Seema	F	5	B.Ed TESL	Master's in TESOL	Lecturer	Degree & Diploma
Misse	F	4.5	B.Ed TESL	Bachelor's degree	Associate lecturer	Pre-University
Esty	F	5	B.Ed TESL	Bachelor's degree	Associate Lecturer	Pre-University

Note: \*TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages)

\*\*TESL (Teaching English as a second language)

## Findings

### Missè - "A teacher is not the same as an academic"

Missè started teaching in the case study institution as an associate lecturer approximately four years ago. Coming into the institution, she was assigned to teach reading and writing skills at the pre-preparatory level to students who did not meet the English entry requirement for their foundation<sup>3</sup> studies. The

<sup>3</sup> Foundation refers to university preparatory programmes which equip students with critical thinking and independent learning skills, familiarising them for admissions to diploma or undergraduate programmes.

transition from being a teacher in a secondary school to being an associate lecturer in a university was not easy; therefore, adjustments were to be expected. Missè explained in her interview, “It was challenging. It took me a whole year to learn, almost a year to adjust” and “It was difficult to adapt”.

When asked why it was difficult to adapt, Missè explained that “there was an expectation, that you knew what you were doing – that freedom which I never experienced as a school teacher”. Although such freedom allowed for more autonomy in practice, for Missè this was quite a shift from her prior workplace. She said, “You need to do everything on your own and I didn’t know how things worked here. So that first term I was very lost”. Nevertheless, Missè explained that she found solace in her teaching. Missè maintained that “I enjoy teaching. The thing that I like the most about teaching is the students”. Missè further noted that “I always get good student feedback. For me, that is all that matters because I came here to teach students”. This excerpt indicates how her self-concept as an English teacher was core and the positive cues from her student feedback affirms this self-concept.

As Missè navigated her way into the new academic community, she became more aware of the contextual cues, particularly the expectations of the institution. This subsequently shaped her practice and her academic identity formation. She reported her perception of what it meant to be an academic has changed significantly upon entering the higher learning institution. She explained this through her workload:

Now I do more than teaching. I do a lot of marketing events and I am very active with a student club as an advisor. I also went to schools, giving talks, giving workshops and I’ve been a judge for competition at school levels.

Missè also noted other differences between teaching in school and in university with regards to career trajectory. Unlike universities, years of service were valued in school because it meant seniority. Missè further elaborated on the differences: “Here, you need to have a postgraduate qualification”. Driven by this, she decided to pursue her masters in her third year of working in the university. When asked whether she will pursue her PhD qualification, Missè explained, “I want to stay in this field, so yes I need a PhD”. This excerpt indicates that this institutional demand is internalized as part of her self-concept as an academic.

As Missè comes to her fifth year of being an associate lecturer and having just completed her viva, her notion of academic identity and the roles academics assume appears to have evolved. When asked about how she perceives the role of a teacher and an academic, she explained:

Being an academic is NOT just teaching. Yes, the main point is teaching, but you still need to do research, you need to lead as well, and give back. So being an academic is a complicated process. You cannot just say you are an academic because you are a teacher. It’s not the same thing. A teacher is not the same as an academic.

The changing work situations or environments as illustrated in Missè’s data indicated that identity development involves challenges and tensions as part of the adjustment process. In the context of the study, moving from teaching in secondary school to university signifies a key period in the UETs’ sense of self. The sense of self becomes more complex as UETs are exposed to new social environments in which they need to learn new roles, new rules and manage new expectations.

### **Esty - “I know I cannot just teach”**

Like Missè, Esty started her teaching career in a secondary school. When asked about why she decided to teach in a higher learning institution, Esty explained, “I wanted to improve myself in terms of my career and I knew working in a higher institution will give me this opportunity to further my study”. Esty reported on her experience as a novice staff in the institution as a lonely process as she did not receive a lot of help from her peers. Esty said, “Not all mentors will be helpful. So I really had to be independent”.

Esty described the difference between the two institutions as significant: “When I first started, the difference was huge. It’s very different from all aspects”. Nonetheless, her self-efficacy as a teacher helped significantly. She explained, “In my school, I was already very independent. So here, I observed others, I asked around - I learnt that way”. Despite the difficulty, Esty expressed that it was a decision that she did not regret: “Changing jobs was hard. But in four years’ time, I have changed a lot ... in terms of exposure and experience”. Thus, it appears that broader academic self-efficacy beliefs informed and further influenced her self-concept (in a positive way). Esty’s self-efficacy and her enhanced ability to adapt in the new environment by observing and being resourceful seemed to shape her self-concept in a positive manner.

Esty conceded that being in a higher learning institution was quite challenging because she constantly had to prove herself. Based on her interview data, this appeared internally driven and contextually mediated. Note how Esty explained her decision to pursue her master’s: “Even before I worked here I had already planned to further my study. And then when I started working here, I could see more reasons why I should keep on doing that”. Esty also reported that she felt inadequate to teach in the higher learning institution as she did not have a postgraduate qualification: “I feel that I should be qualified and fit enough to teach in HE”. Esty further elaborated, saying, “In terms of my career right now, I know I cannot just teach. So I’m doing my postgraduate studies. This will push me so that I can go to the next phase”.

The emphasis on research appeared to be a source of contention for Esty. As the bulk of Esty’s workload as an ECA was mainly teaching, this limited her opportunities to participate in research activities. She lamented, saying, “For me, it always goes back to the post that I have - that I am a permanent staff and I was hired to teach. So whatever happens I really have to focus on my core business-teaching”. This was a source of frustration for her as she sees other colleagues being involved in research projects. Esty expressed this aptly: “I wish that I could choose what I can do and what I should do. But I know it doesn’t work that way”.

As she was fast approaching her thesis completion, Esty made plans to do her PhD. Esty explained her decision: “It is what we have to have if we wish to stay in academia”. She further emphasised the importance of having a doctoral degree: “[PhD] It will help me to go further. With that, I feel that I can approach colleagues and propose collaboration”. It is apparent that Esty is internalising the cues from her immediate context regarding the importance of doing research and participating in collaborations. Being immersed in the current academic context appears to have a profound effect on Esty’s perception of academic life. In Esty’s case, this impact appeared to permeate how she perceives her role and identification with academic work.

### **Seema – “Right now, I’m a tertiary teacher”**

Seema comes from a family of educators. She explained that her decision to be an academic was an easy one: “Education was in the family. It was a major influence for me to be an educator as it was in the family”. Prior to doing her masters abroad, Seema taught in a secondary school for a year. Although the job promised security, Seema felt that she needed to pursue a postgraduate qualification as a means of improving herself. She justified it, saying, “Nowadays, this [degree] is not sufficient anymore. [I] need more in order to fit in the job market –more knowledge, skills. It is a competitive market”.

When asked whether she faced any challenges in transition from teaching in a secondary school into a higher learning institution, Seema explained that it was to be expected and reported that it was minimal. She said, “I’ve always been resourceful. To know how things worked here, I ‘adopted’ a mentor and learned from her”. Interestingly for Seema, the challenge was presented in her classes whereby she reported students had difficulty in learning. Seema reported that “I tried to treat my students like adults but honestly, it is still very much like secondary school”. She attributed this to students’ prior learning experience: “They are Malaysian students; teaching has to be like what it was in school; at this beginner’s stage, at least”.

Seema also attributed the learning challenges to the use of English as a medium of instruction. She reported that “English proficiency is a major issue” for her students. Her concerns regarding low proficiency reverberated in the interview: “Low proficiency poses more challenges. It is hard for them to understand. Some are unable to cope”. From these excerpts it appears that her core self is one of a teacher as indicated by her concerns for her students and reflecting on what approaches could be used to address the issue. Seema summed it up aptly, stating, “For me, right now and for this institution this is the core job – core business. Right now I’m a tertiary teacher”.

In Seema’s case, she acknowledged that research and staff professional development are emphasised more in higher learning institutions. She maintained that “In this institution, it’s [PhD] a must for career advancement”. Nevertheless, realising her commitment was bound to teaching, Seema opted to attend in-house trainings whenever the opportunity arose. She stated, “I’ve attended training and workshops. I’ve invested in e-blended learning because it is the way to go right now. These are useful as technology and apps can make learning so much more engaging and interactive”. Seema had limited experience with research, which she explained, saying, “So for now, I’m just focusing on getting the PhD”.

When talking about her challenges, Seema also conveyed her frustration of not being perceived as a full member of the academic community. She said, “Being in a language faculty, I feel like we are just a support school and we are being side-lined all the time. It feels like my role is to support the students and colleagues from other faculties”. Seema elaborated, stating, “You are hired to teach, especially in this faculty. That is why my workload model always reaches the maximum”. Seema, commenting that she is currently a “tertiary teacher”, underscored that her academic identity projected was temporal and that negotiating acceptance into academia involves tension and conflict.

## Discussion

### Factors Shaping UETs’ Academic Identities

In this study, the narratives of challenges, conflict, and success indicated that multiple influences are impacting on the formulation of the UETs’ academic identity as they navigate their way in academia. These factors can be represented as internal and external influences within the *ecology of the self*, which shape self-concept (see Figure 1). In this ecology, the individual’s self is central. It is made up of the personal and social self-concepts. The notion of a layered self-concept is also supported by Deaux (1992) and Oyserman (2004). The internal and external factors that influence self-concept are summarised in Figure 1. As the individual is central, this framework shows how internal and external influences appear to be interrelated in influencing self-concept and do not appear to function in isolation. These factors can act as both facilitators and barriers with regard to academic identity development.

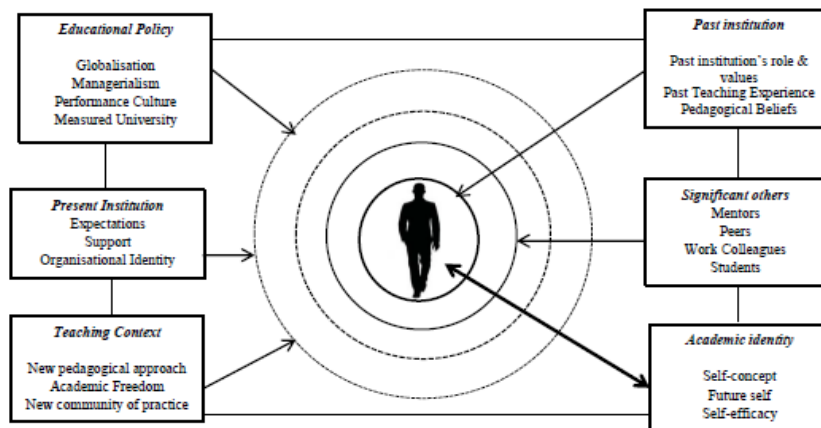


Figure 1. The university English teachers’ ecology of self

With all the changes happening in HE, what constitutes academic work has become more diverse. In fact, Deem et al. (2007) maintain that academic activities now include, “academic knowledge work”, such as consultancy activities and entrepreneurial endeavours. As indicated by the findings, UETs have to participate in leadership, service, and engagement, on top of their teaching-learning activities. Thus, in the current setting, the UETs faced many challenges and expectations, making the academic identity complex and layered. While ‘academic identity’ may have dominantly professional roots, an academic’s identity is affected by specific organisational imperatives, and thus, by organisational identities. As people who have grown up and engaged in processes of becoming academics within the context of neoliberalism, it is unsurprising that the UETs were describing their identity in neo-liberal terms (e.g., core-business, good feedback, collaborations). This is similar to Archer’s (2008) study, where younger academics derived their sense of value “from producing valued outputs” (p. 272), such as research grants and publications.

Being immersed in the current academic context appears to have shaped the UETs’ academic identities significantly. To illustrate, contextual cues shaped what Seema, Esty, and Missè perceived to be important for their academic careers, such as having postgraduate qualifications. This was observable through the reported goals of completing their masters and aiming to continue with a PhD. Based on the findings, academic identity is developed through critical reflections on past and present practices and is defined by one’s own expectations and self-knowledge. These findings relate to Kinash and Wood’s (2013) study, where they argued that “[academics] use internal processes of review to scan our environment and adapt to changing factors, while staying focused on our competencies” (p. 180). In this study, when UETs were placed into a new setting, they had to reflect on and re-evaluate their abilities to adapt to internal and situational changes. In this new setting, the UET’s self-concept may be questioned or reinforced as part of the active restructuring of the ecology of the self. Note that all three UETs appeared to have internalized the external influences (from colleagues, supervisors, and institutional expectations) as part of their academic identities. However, the UETs differently integrated internal and external factors into their self-concepts. The following section will now discuss how these internal and external factors shaped the development of their academic identities in detail.

### **The Development of UET’s Academic Identities**

The UETs who took part in the study appeared to have undergone a process of reconstruction and negotiation in order to ‘belong’ in the current academic setting. In order to adapt to academia, it is likely that adjustments had to be made in terms of core beliefs about teaching, goals, and expectations in academia. This restructuring was evident in Esty’s account: “When I first started, the difference was huge”. The restructuring process has been described in literature as difficult, and often as a source of conflict and struggle (Korhonen & Törmä, 2014). This was evidenced in the reports of UETs being “lost” and experiencing challenges in adapting, for example, with Missè saying, “It took me a whole year to learn, almost a year to adjust”.

It is probable that the UETs are relatively new members of the academic community, this requires them to make adjustments to their present selves. This restructuring may explain why there were various representations of UETs in the interview (e.g., with Seema stating, “I am a tertiary teacher,” or with Missè saying, “A teacher is not the same as an academic”). In Seema’s case, her academic representation was further augmented by conflicts from not being perceived as a full member of the academic community. She lamented, saying, “Being in this faculty, I feel like we are just a support school and we are being side-lined all the time”. Such sentiments were also shared by Esty: “I felt that I should be qualified and fit enough to teach in HE... so I’m doing my postgraduate studies”. These findings highlight how aspects of institutional management and the organisational identity that comes with it could impact on the UET’s academic identity development, positively and negatively.

The new setting appears to have signified a key period in their sense of self in which the university context allowed them to actively define their self-concept and purpose. The interactions that occur while learning new roles, rules, and expectations may require the UETs to develop new social roles and revise



their current identities. Moving from teaching in secondary school to university presented a new social environment in which interactions occurred and identities were formed. Therefore, the sense of self became more complex as UETs needed to learn new roles and rules and manage new expectations. This was evidenced by Missè's report in which her academic duties encompassed "...marketing events. I also went to schools, giving talks, giving workshops". It is likely that the requirement to perform a variety of roles whilst participating in a number of academic groups will lead to an individual developing multiple (and sometimes conflicting) identities. This is where conflicts and incongruences between the personal self and the collective/social self occur, making the process of making sense of who they are as academics an ongoing effort, or as commonly depicted in literature, "a constant struggle" (Archer, 2008). This was aptly captured in Esty's story of not being able to be part of a research project due to her current teaching workload: "I wish that I could choose what I can do and what I should do. But I know it doesn't work that way".

In this paper, the stage that the UETs were at implied that there were developmental changes to their self-concepts, and subsequently, to their academic identities. The identity stories also suggest that the development of self-concept varied for each academic. Some UETs held self-concepts as teachers that appeared central, while others held self-concepts as lecturers that seemed more peripheral in nature. In particular, a central self-concept as a teacher appeared to help maintain continuity. This was evidenced in the way the UETs maintained a distinction between teachers and academics (e.g., Missè). Thus, parallel to the understanding that self-concept is "susceptible to change due to life transitions" (Demo, 1992, p. 303), Seema's self-evaluation of "right now I'm a tertiary teacher" could be perceived as a temporal identity or a coping strategy that balances her past and her current self-concepts.

Research has noted that experiences during the initial years of academic careers have a great influence on the development of the professional identities of university scholars (Cox, 2013; Matthews, Lodge, & Bosanquet, 2014). It is during this time that academics acquire skills, build foundations, and make decisions for their academic trajectory. As indicated in Esty's case, where she said, "in 4 years' time, I have changed a lot...in terms of exposure and experience," experience with academic success enhanced her self-efficacy beliefs as an academic. This in turn was internalized and positively shaped her self-concept as an academic.

Nonetheless, there were also instances of UETs who reported narratives of conflict and tension. Based on this finding, it is clear that the 'journey' of academic identity development will not be homogenous. This is because academics will experience paths that are "uniquely fashioned, influenced by context within which growth is enabled, hampered and directed by individual's own agency and identity" (van Schalkwyk, Cilliers, Adendorff, Cattell, & Herman, 2013, p. 148). It is evident that context can shape identity and perceptions about the academic career in complex and evolving ways. For this reason, it is likely that the academic identity will evolve across career and life stages.

### **The Role of Self-concept in Shaping the Academic Identity**

In the findings, self-concept played a role in (re)structuring the self. The identity stories revealed how the dissimilarity in demands and the changes in HE required the UETs to restructure their self-concepts into early career academics. In restructuring the self, the context appeared to promote (and perhaps enforce) certain salient identities. For example, there is the 'independent' or 'research active' academic which the UETs spoke of favorably. The findings regarding salient identities promoted by the academic context in this study parallel the findings by Stoner and Munyon (2011), who stated that "identities are evoked only when there is a situational pressure to do so (or a possible reward for enacting such identity)" (p. 98). In the UETs' case, the reward may have been increased participation and legitimized identity in the new community.

In addition to restructuring the self, self-concept is also associated strongly with motivation. Self-concept appears to drive and motivate the UETs to have certain behaviours, such as minimising the discrepancy between their current self and future self. The future selves were varied, and were expressed

through goals of self-improvement not only in terms of career trajectory, but also in relation to their overall development as academics. For example, Seema mentioned the importance of a postgraduate qualification: “I need more in order to fit in the job market – more knowledge, skills. It is a competitive market,” whereas Esty wished to continue her education so that “it will help me to go further”. Note that Esty explained that having this qualification will enable her to perform competently as an academic and that “with that [PhD] I feel that I can approach colleagues and propose collaborations”. This reflects Usborne and Taylor’s (2010) view that self-concept clarity allows individuals to engage in appropriate processes that enable them to perform competently and achieve their ideal selves.

The notion of future selves that reverberated throughout the data was observable in the strategies that the UETs deemed appropriate to lead them to their desired goals. For example, Seema “adopted a mentor and learned from her,” while the others planned to further their studies at the PhD level. It appeared that the future self links the self with motivation and practice. This is also noted in other literature on this subject (e.g., Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). This finding confirms the motivating effects of self-concept on academic-related achievements, as suggested by Marsh and Martin (2011). Therefore, it is possible that enhancing UETs visions of their future selves may be a way to enhance a positive academic trajectory and identity development.

The changes in practice in the new academic setting appear to cause disruption to the UETs’ present self-concept. This disruption could impact on an individual’s overall sense of well-being (Johnson & Nozick, 2011) and cause certain self-strategies to be protected. Seema’s case, which was inclined towards ‘self-protection’ (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) from what was considered to be a threat to her core sense of self (i.e., her core teacher identity), provided evidence of this difficulty. Seema reported that “I tried to treat my students like adults but honestly, it is still very much like secondary school... teaching has to be like what it was in school”. Seema clinging on to her professional teacher identity reflects how self-preservation (Sedikides, Gaertner, & O’Mara, 2011) makes new and contrasting self-concepts less easily assimilated (McConnell, 2011). This desire to continue to focus on maintaining a credible role as a teacher is understandable.

## Conclusion

Becoming an academic is a complex endeavour and is shaped by a range of factors that include self-knowledge, day-to-day interactions, and institutional expectations. This paper has illustrated how self-concept allowed for critical reflections and subsequently the restructuring of the UETs’ sense of self. This framework also demonstrated that self-concept played a motivating role in the ‘processes of becoming’, where the appeal of a ‘future self’ was a stimulus to the UETs’ motivation, behavior, and practice, thus explaining why they persevered when faced with challenges in their academic setting. For UETs, transitioning into academia can be marked by conflicts, and individuals have to find a balance between maintaining their individuality (*I*) and their similarity with the other ECAs (*we*) and their academic community of practice. Such knowledge enriches our understanding of academic life and careers. It is imperative that strategies which can support and sustain a more positive transition for UETs into academia be implemented.

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