

Research Article

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Striving for Success or Struggling for Identity? Navigating Promotion Expectations and Academics' Professional Aspirations

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Abstract

Background/purpose. As core educational spaces, higher education institutions emphasize a holistic approach to academic promotion, valuing research, teaching, and service equally. However, promotion criteria often reflect institutional expectations that may not match academics' professional identity preferences. This study contributes to educational research by exploring how promotion criteria shape academics' roles as educators and affect their professional identity development within teaching and learning contexts. Understanding how academics navigate these challenges can highlight needed support for career advancement, though research in this area is limited.

Materials/methods. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with and the reflexive journals of nine conveniently sampled academics at a South African university. They were thematically analyzed through the social identity theory lens. The analysis revealed contrasts in institutional promotion expectations, faculty changes, and academics' promotion preferences.

Results. First, a misalignment exists between promotion policies and academic priorities, creating role conflict, identity dissonance, and career dissatisfaction among academics. Second, an overemphasis on research metrics and the requirement to publish in high-impact journals marginalizes the importance of key performance areas (KPA's). Third, a balanced promotion structure is needed to ensure equitable recognition of diverse academic contributions and holistic career progression. The study suggests that universities implement inclusive promotion policies that fairly recognize all KPA's.

Conclusion. Stakeholders should revise promotion metrics to acknowledge diverse contributions, use flexible evaluation methods, and create role-specific tracks to align career paths with individual interests, reducing burnout and improving job satisfaction.



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1. Introduction

South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are recognized for their integrative framework that equally values scholarship, research, teaching, community engagement, and leadership (Folabit & Reddy, 2024; Sadiq et al., 2019). This structure operates within a broader context where transformation and decolonization are fundamental educational imperatives (Sadiq et al., 2019; van Schalkwyk et al., 2022). Unlike external recruitment processes, academic promotion involves internal applications aimed at gaining recognition, status, and financial advancement. For the integrity of this process, it must be conducted equitably, devoid of biases at both individual and group levels (Sadiq et al., 2019). However, disparities exist, as the dynamics of promotion and career progression within academic institutions are often intricate and contentious. Questions may persist regarding the mechanisms that determine why certain academics advance while others do not. Potential factors include misalignments between the promotion criteria prioritizing institutional objectives and the personal professional identities of academics, or the oversight of how individuals choose to define their roles within the institution. The journey toward promotion is inherently personal, intertwining with each academic's aspirations for career success and overall life fulfillment (Miller, 2016). Consequently, tension can arise between academics' professional identity inclinations and the institutional requirements for career progression (Eversole & Crowder, 2020; Szromek & Wolniak, 2020). This tension may affect career advancement, job satisfaction, and general well-being, particularly when professional aspirations clash with institutional expectations (Bates & Schrewe, 2016). In this context, the complexity, evolution, diversity, and polarization of academic identity in higher education come to the forefront (Folabit, 2022).

Academic promotion represents the systematic progression of scholars within the higher education hierarchy. However, as suggested by Szromek and Wolniak (2020) and Eversole and Crowder (2020), the criteria governing promotion often engender tensions, as academics confront conflicting expectations that may diverge from their professional identity preferences. Research indicates that these complexities stem from the disjunction between institutional demands and individual career paths (Folabit, 2022; Sadiq et al., 2019). Additionally, factors such as disciplinary affiliation, teaching philosophy, research interests, and personal values significantly influence this dynamic, with these elements evolving in response to institutional policies and personal career aspirations (Folabit & Jita, 2024; Folabit & Reddy, 2024; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). Different academic institutions exhibit varied approaches to promotion criteria, with some prioritizing teaching, research, community engagement, and administrative responsibilities (Al-Worafi, 2024; Folabit, 2022; Folabit et al., 2023; Folabit & Reddy, 2024), while others grant academics more autonomy in selecting which aspects of their roles to emphasize (Quigley, 2011). As a result, academic identity is not static but rather fluid, continually reshaped by shifting institutional contexts, disciplinary conventions, and personal ambitions (Folabit, 2022; Matsepe, 2023).

Although Schimanski and Alperin (2018) assert that academics are evaluated for tenure and promotion based on their research output, teaching effectiveness, and community service, the tenure and promotion evaluation process has faced criticism for placing disproportionate emphasis on research and publication, often at the expense of teaching and service responsibilities. Studies indicate that research obligations can occupy more than half of academics' working hours in some HEIs (Folabit et al., 2023; Schimanski & Alperin, 2018). This study posits that the competitive nature of academia, characterized by a "publish or perish" culture, has heightened concerns about unrealistic institutional expectations regarding publication volume, the criteria used to assess research quality, and the limited capacity of prestigious journals to meet the growing demand for publications. Aprile et al. (2021) support the notion that this prevailing institutional discourse significantly shapes how academics forge their professional identities and establish credibility in their roles. These institutional pressures play a crucial role in influencing academics' professional identities,

compelling them to navigate competing demands. This balancing act highlights the complex interplay between academics' personal values and institutional expectations (Folabit & Reddy, 2024).

Subbaye's (2018) research at a South African university revealed prevalent dissatisfaction among academics regarding institutional promotion criteria, with a predominant perception that research productivity is essential for career advancement, while teaching contributions are frequently undervalued in this evaluative framework (Subbaye, 2018). This disparity generates considerable pressure and frustration among faculty (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018), and various scholars have noted the detrimental effects on job satisfaction, as well as increased stress and burnout, which collectively hinder motivation and productivity (Kinman & Wray, 2013; O'Brien & Guiney, 2021; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). The tension faced by academics intensifies as they strive to align their professional aspirations with institutional mandates that prioritize quantifiable research outputs, such as publications. Despite extensive debate on promotion inequities, few studies have examined how these criteria shape or conflict with academics' professional identity preferences, especially in South Africa. This study fills that gap by exploring how academics reconcile identity with institutional expectations for career progression. Importantly, this research contributes to higher education pedagogy by illuminating how institutional promotion criteria affect academics' roles and identity, with implications for staff development and leadership in educational institutions. Accordingly, this study aims to (1) explore academics' understanding of promotion criteria, (2) examine how identity preferences are balanced with institutional demands, and (3) identify challenges in aligning identity with promotion expectations. The research addresses the following questions:

1. RQ1: What is the academics' understanding of promotion and the criteria for promotion?
2. RQ2: How do academics balance their professional identity with institutional promotion criteria?
3. RQ3: What challenges arise from reconciling academics' identity preferences and institutional expectations for promotion?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in social identity theory (SIT), first developed by Tajfel (1974) and later expanded by Tajfel and Turner (1979). SIT is an influential theoretical framework that explains how individuals' sense of self and group membership shape their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (McDonnell & Griffin, 2017; Miller, 2016; Simsek & Simsek, 2014). At the core of this theory is the notion that people derive a significant part of their identity from the social groups to which they belong, such as their ethnicity, nationality, or occupation. According to SIT, individuals strive to maintain a positive self-image, which is closely tied to their group memberships (Venu et al., 2021). They tend to view their in-group more favorably and differentiate it from out-groups, a phenomenon known as in-group bias (Darvin & Sun, 2024; Molenberghs, 2013). This process of social categorization and comparison leads individuals to emphasize the similarities within their group and the differences between their group and others, ultimately reinforcing their sense of group identity and distinctiveness (Molenberghs, 2013). In the context of this study, SIT provides a valuable lens to understand how academics negotiate their professional identities amidst conflicting institutional demands. Specifically, the core SIT processes—social categorization, identification, and comparison—align closely with the challenges that academics face in reconciling their personal identity preferences with institutional promotion criteria, particularly in environments that prioritize research over teaching and community engagement. Social identity theory begins with social categorization, where individuals classify themselves and others. Academics, as professionals, categorize themselves within various roles based on their activities as researchers, teachers, or community service providers. This classification is often influenced by institutional expectations and the criteria for promotion, which vary across universities. In South Africa, for example, traditional

universities emphasize research outputs for promotion, leading academics to align their identities with research-oriented roles even if they prioritize teaching or community engagement. The study's focus on the merging of personal identity preferences with institutional demands can be understood through this lens. Academics may find themselves categorized not just as teachers or researchers but as hybrid professionals who must balance multiple, often conflicting roles. The institutional environment thus becomes a key determinant in how academics construct and perceive their professional identity, with promotion criteria serving as a primary driver of this categorization. In educational settings, the alignment (or misalignment) between institutional structures and academics' self-perceptions is critical, as it influences not only professional identity construction but also teaching practices and student engagement.

3. Literature Review

Szromek and Wolniak (2020) identified two distinct approaches to career advancement. They categorize these into competitive models, where individuals seeking promotion must vie against other applicants for a limited number of available positions, and promotion models, where individuals can advance to higher roles upon meeting specific criteria in teaching and research. This distinction highlights that the competitive model centers around competing for scarce positions, while the promotion model focuses on qualifying for advancement based on personal accomplishments. However, while academic promotion criteria are dominated by various constraints, such that academics need to negotiate to progress in their career path, traditional academic career processes remain strong and differ by country (Folabit, 2022; Szromek & Wolniak, 2020). For instance, in Canada and the United States, the career progression of academics is shaped by the review, promotion, and tenure (RPT) process, where academics are evaluated across research, teaching, and service dimensions (Dawson et al., 2022). Dawson et al. (2022) add that although there is increasing pressure for faculty to excel in all three areas, the emphasis placed on each can differ based on the institution. However, excelling in research, teaching, and service may not be sufficient for academic progression because the concept of "collegiality" has sparked debate, with some advocating for it to be considered a fourth dimension. Others, like the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), argue that if collegiality is assessed, it should be incorporated within the existing three categories (Dawson et al., 2022). Furthermore, even strong performance in these areas may not necessarily ensure a successful review or promotion, indicating that other factors or criteria may play a role in the final decision (Dawson et al., 2022).

Barrow and Grant (2019) examined how equity is addressed during the promotion process of academic staff at a university in New Zealand. Barrow and Grant's study looked at how equity ideas are included in both government and university policies and then focused on how these ideas play out in the process of promoting university staff. Their study found that while universities often say they support equity (fairness and equal opportunities), it does not play a major role in deciding promotions. Instead, equity-related work tends to be the responsibility of specific groups or departments rather than being part of the broader academic promotion system (Barrow & Grant, 2019). Barrow and Grant highlight a fundamental disconnect between policy and practice in academic promotion, where equity is acknowledged but not meaningfully integrated into decision-making. This suggests that while universities rhetorically support fairness, their promotion systems remain largely meritocratic in a narrow sense, prioritizing traditional research and teaching achievements over broader contributions to institutional equity. As a result, academics engaged in diversity and inclusion efforts may find their work undervalued, reinforcing existing inequalities in career progression. We argue for the need for universities to institutionalize equity as a formal criterion in promotion processes, ensuring that contributions to a fairer academic environment are recognized and rewarded.

In some African countries, newly appointed academics typically begin their careers as assistant lecturers, regardless of whether they hold a master's or doctoral degree or where their qualification was obtained (Folabit, 2022). For instance, in Cameroon, *"academic promotion is subject to superiority in the candidate's initial grade, along with other conditions such as publications, obtaining a higher educational qualification (a doctorate, authorization for supervision, a competitive examination), and the administrative application of the candidate"* (Folabit, 2022; Ngwé & Pokam, 2017). Subbaye's (2018) study, *Teaching in Academic Promotions at South African Universities: A Policy Perspective*, examined the challenges and biases embedded in academic promotion processes, including institutional traditions and the influence of personal networks. The findings indicate that while both teaching and research play a role in promotions, research has historically been given greater weight. However, Subbaye (2018) notes that after 2014, many universities began revising their promotion criteria to place greater emphasis on teaching, driven in part by initiatives such as the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP). Despite this shift, traditional universities in South Africa have made more progress in recognizing teaching for promotion to full professor, whereas universities of technology (UoTs) continue to prioritize research (Subbaye, 2018). A growing trend toward single-track promotion pathways aims to evaluate both teaching and research equally, yet there is concern that treating them as separate criteria could inadvertently reinforce the lower status of teaching compared to research. To counter these biases, many universities in South Africa are expanding the range of evaluators involved in promotion decisions to ensure a more balanced assessment (Subbaye, 2018).

The promotion and tenure process can be likened to a labyrinth, posing numerous challenges, especially for early-career academics. This has highlighted a gap in the literature concerning clear guidelines for promotion criteria. The lack of consistent standards and the variability in expectations across different departments and institutions complicate the process (Bates & Schrewe, 2016). According to Schimanski and Alperin (2018) and Dawson et al. (2022), while retention, promotion, and tenure (RPT) guidelines may not explicitly detail the importance of research, teaching, and service, most academics believe that a robust research and publication record is essential. The authors argue that exceptional performance in teaching or service cannot fully compensate for a weak research profile (Dawson et al., 2022; Schimanski & Alperin, 2018).

Furthermore, Schimanski and Alperin (2018) assert that there is a significant connection between the challenges in scholarly communication and career advancement, particularly regarding publishing. To tackle the difficulties that academics face in perhaps effectively communicating their research role and advancing their careers, it is vital to understand how academic rewards are structured, especially in terms of publishing. A better understanding of the tenure and promotion process could lead to significant improvements. These improvements may include reducing the focus on the prestige of publications and citation metrics, restructuring the peer review system, and enhancing the quality, affordability, and flexibility of publishing options (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018). Thus, there is a pressing need to examine how research, teaching, service and perhaps administration or leadership are weighted in the RPT process, particularly concerning the disproportionate emphasis on research and publications (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018). Consequently, understanding the tension between professional identity and promotion requirements (van Schalkwyk et al., 2022) becomes even more critical in the context of South African universities.

4. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study research method (Machimana et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2019) within an interpretivist philosophical framework. A single case study design was deemed appropriate for this study as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of academics' lived experiences in a bounded institutional context (Yin, 2009). The selected institution may reflect typical promotion challenges prevalent in South African HEIs. This

methodology offers a comprehensive approach to exploring and understanding complex phenomena in real-world contexts (Rashid et al., 2019). The study not only investigated the depth of the phenomenon but also examined the complexities surrounding “what” the phenomenon is and “how” it manifests to enhance overall understanding (Fomunyam, 2018). Consequently, the study aimed to gather in-depth narratives from academics at a public university in South Africa regarding the challenges of navigating their professional identity preferences while meeting institutional expectations for tenure and promotion criteria. By focusing on a specific South African university, the researchers adhered to a clearly defined process that encompasses foundational, pre-field, and reporting phases (Miller et al., 2023). To generate data from the participants, the researchers utilized two data sources: semi-structured interviews that lasted between 25 to 40 minutes and participants’ reflexive journals (Busetto et al., 2020). This approach helped to minimize potential subjectivity and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the participants’ narratives (Kuzembayeva et al., 2022).

4.1. Sampling

This study used a convenience sampling technique to recruit nine (9) participants—four females and five males—prioritizing depth over breadth. This approach is crucial in social sciences for understanding complex phenomena. Participants were selected based on their accessibility and proximity to the researchers to provide a comprehensive description and interpretation of the phenomena as perceived by the participants (Robinson, 2013). Inclusion criteria required participants to be full-time academic staff with at least three years of experience at the institution. Participants were excluded based on being part-time lecturers or in non-academic roles. The individuals selected for this study volunteered to participate. Ethical approval was obtained to conduct the study, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Before the interviews, they were provided with an informed consent form to read and sign. This study ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity.

4.2. Data Generation

Two data collection instruments were used: a semi-structured interview guide and a reflexive journal prompt. The interview guide was developed based on the literature and reviewed by two qualitative researchers for face validity. A pilot test with two non-participating academics led to revisions for clarity and flow. Interviews included open-ended questions about participants’ experiences with promotion criteria and identity. The reflexive journal prompt invited participants to reflect on their academic roles, aspirations, and institutional pressures. Reliability was reinforced through consistency in data collection procedures and triangulation of sources.

4.3. Data Analysis

The generated data were then analyzed through coding and thematic analysis. The data analysis process began with manually transcribing the semi-structured interviews and participants’ reflexive journals. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and corrected multiple times to ensure the data were clean before coding. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the content and an initial insight into the data by making notes and comments on interesting and recurring ideas. In the next stage, relevant ideas were identified and labeled with short codes to assist the researchers in associating segments with the research question. Codes were then reviewed to find connections, and similar codes were grouped to form themes. The themes were refined for coherence and to ensure they accurately represented the data (Cohen et al., 2018). Finally, the data were reported by presenting quotes or excerpts to support each theme. This process followed Braun and Clark’s (2006) thematic analysis steps of familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report (Dawadi, 2020). To ensure the quality and rigor of the study, the researchers employed a checklist, reflexivity, and member-checking (Busetto et al., 2020).

5. Results

This study explored the experiences of academics at a South African university and the tension between their professional identity preferences and institutional expectations for promotion. The findings are structured around the study's three research questions, respectively, to highlight the alignment between empirical data and the study's aims (see Table 1).

Table 1. Findings Overview

Theme	Category	Sub-categories	Description
Institutional promotion policies and professional identity alignment	Standardized promotion frameworks in higher education	Clarity and communication of promotion policies	Clear promotion guidelines ensure transparency, but faculty-specific adaptations raise equity concerns
		Criteria and evaluation mechanisms	
		Faculty-specific adaptations	
		Impact on academic identity and role prioritization	
Role prioritization	Conflicting priorities in academic career progression	Imbalance among key performance areas (KPAs)	Pressured to prioritize research for promotion, despite strengths in teaching or service. This leads to identity conflict and calls for more balanced recognition across all academic roles.
		Pressure from research-centric promotion metrics	
		Identity dissonance and professional misalignment	
		Calls for a balanced or alternative promotion track	
Challenges of balancing multiple roles	Academic workload and time constraints	Competing demands across teaching, research, and leadership	Struggle to balance research, teaching, and leadership duties with limited time for high-impact publishing. This imbalance contributes to stress, reduced productivity, and the risk of burnout.
		Insufficient time for research productivity	
		Risk of burnout and reduced well-being	

5.1. RQ1: Institutional Promotion Policies and Professional Identity Alignment

Evidence was identified indicating the existence of established norms for promotion within the university. Participants in this study highlighted that all policies governing the institution and its faculty are communicated to new faculty members at the time of their recruitment, ensuring they fully understand the expectations placed upon them. A participant reinforced this notion by stating,

"I think many times we are told about this. I think it's the policy. The one on promotion ... yes, promotion policy. Because, you know ... I think that there are structures, and there are clear structures; all we need to do is to align ourselves with those structures." (Participant #6)

Supporting this, Participant #1 added,

"I think everything has been clarified regarding the expectations ... the promotion policy."

This research aimed to explore participants' insights into the academic promotion policies at their university. It is a common organizational practice to ensure that employees are well-informed about these policies, with HEIs being no exception. As such, participants were asked to detail their comprehension of the promotion frameworks, delineate the associated procedural steps, and share their experiences regarding the congruence of these policies with their professional identity and aspirations.

Although all participants displayed a grasp of the promotional practices, Participant #3 provided a comprehensive analysis of the criteria, articulating specific factors that influenced the decision-making process.

"Promotion is made up of four pillars, mostly about academic performance in research output and contribution to teaching and learning, engaged scholarship, and leadership and administration. So, as academics, we are required, first of all, to understand what it takes to be promoted. Then, we are expected to demonstrate excellence in these areas, particularly through research publication in accredited journals, successful postgraduate supervision, and contribution to curriculum development. These are reflected in four categories. However, each faculty has made some adjustments to their promotion guidelines. Also, each of these categories has different conditions that must be adhered to before one can be promoted."

Expanding on the insights provided by Participant #3, Participant #8 elaborated on the intricacies of the promotion process, detailing the criteria, evaluation methods, and KPAs involved.

"I have to apply to be promoted. I need to apply if I feel that I qualify by meeting the weighted points needed to be promoted to the next rank. Then, this application is evaluated based on weighted criteria, which also depend on my rank. There are due processes, such as the head of the department being assisted by a senior colleague in evaluating my performance after calculating my achieved scores. As I said, each faculty has defined guidelines, which may differ to some extent from the institution's standard guideline."

The narratives provided by participants reveal that the university functions under a set of clearly articulated policies that prioritizes transparency and accountability. This clarity facilitates a cohesive understanding among faculty regarding institutional expectations, thereby mitigating ambiguity. Nevertheless, varying guidelines specific to different faculties indicate a degree of institutional flexibility, which presents advantages and challenges. On the one hand, this flexibility enables faculties to adapt promotion criteria to address their particular contexts and needs. On the other hand, such variability may result in inconsistencies across the university, potentially leading to disparate experiences and perceptions of equity among faculty members.

Furthermore, the promotion process is largely merit-based, focusing on measurable outcomes such as research outputs, teaching and learning performance, leadership, and engaged scholarship. However, Participant #7 argued that this *"results-driven approach to research may put pressure on us to prioritize research outputs over other roles of our professional identity."* The emphasis on points and scores could also overshadow qualitative aspects of academic work, particularly in fields where research outputs might be harder to quantify. Ultimately, while the structure provides clear guidelines for career progression, the participants' experiences of navigating these policies may vary depending on faculty-specific adjustments, personal academic goals, and the weight placed on various pillars of performance. This might affect how academics align their professional identity with institutional expectations.

5.2. RQ2: Role Prioritization

How HEIs approach role prioritization is critical, as effective management of academic responsibilities hinges on the clarity of defined expectations. Although the participants demonstrated a solid grasp of the promotion criteria established by their institution, they highlighted a significant misalignment between institutional and faculty-specific criteria, subsequently impacting their prioritization of roles. Participants #2 and #3 claimed that institutional promotion policies mandate equal engagement across all KPAs—teaching, research, service, and administration/leadership—despite their strong inclination toward one or two of these areas. This creates an inherent tension within academia, where role prioritization conflicts with institutional and faculty expectations for career progression and promotion. Attesting to this, Participant #4 felt that despite a strong passion for teaching, academic promotion is primarily driven by research output. As a result, *“I perceive a misalignment between my teaching efforts and institutional reward structures.”* Feeling compelled to prioritize research despite her teaching commitments, Participant #4 felt that teaching workloads further limit their research productivity, which *“impacts my career advancement opportunities.”*

Participants seemed to express a dissonance between their pedagogical roles and the prevailing research-centric orientation of their institution/faculty. This inconsistency, they believed, leads to identity conflicts, change of career priorities, and heightened dissatisfaction as they confront pressures to prioritize tasks that may be less professionally fulfilling. Arguably, they may have to modify their identities to better conform to the imperatives of institutional expectations, which might lead to a gradual alienation from their identity preferences and responsibilities. This shift not only risks compromising their sense of career authenticity but may also contribute to the marginalization of teaching, community engagement, and administration within the academic system.

However, while research enhances academic institutions' reputation, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the growing pressures related to promotion criteria that emphasize metrics such as high-impact publications. This dissatisfaction arises not from the research itself but from the institution's focus on research achievements for career advancement, neglecting broader academic contributions. As Participant #1 noted,

“You are constantly told to publish, and not just any publication, but high-impact journals. It is no longer about passion but meeting the demands to stay competitive.”

Participant #9 emphasized that,

“Well, I'm not able to meet the target because even if you say I am targeting to have this number of papers published, something that delays us is the journals, you know.”

Participant #2 noted: *“I am constantly juggling; the research expectations are just too high, too many, so I am pursuing research not out of passion but because it is required for promotion.”* Conversely, Participant #4 echoed that one is tempted to forget the important role outreach plays not only in their promotion but career trajectory because *“community outreach is in a way engaged silently.”* As such, Participants #4 and #9 advised that all KPAs should be prioritized equally because it seems *“the focus is disproportionate, which doesn't reflect the full scope of our responsibilities.”* Participant #7 supported this notion by stating that *“a teaching track would allow those of us who are more passionate about other areas to be recognized for our contributions without being forced into research.”*

The findings reveal a fundamental misalignment between institutional promotion policies and academics' professional priorities, particularly in the prioritization of KPAs such as teaching, research, service, and administration. While participants demonstrated a clear understanding of their institution's promotion criteria, they perceived a disconnect between institutional expectations and faculty-specific demands, creating role conflict and identity dissonance. Many participants expressed

frustration that academic progression remains disproportionately tied to research output, forcing them to prioritize research to remain competitive. Furthermore, participants raised concerns about the increasing pressures of research-driven promotion metrics, particularly the emphasis on publishing in high-impact journals. While they acknowledged the value of research in enhancing institutional reputation, they criticized the overemphasis on research achievements at the expense of teaching, community engagement, and leadership responsibilities. Delays in the publication process, excessive research expectations, and the neglect of outreach activities also emerged in this study. Some participants advocated for a more balanced promotion structure, such as a teaching track, that would allow academics to be recognized for contributions beyond research.

5.3. RQ3: Challenges of Balancing Multiple Roles

A notable challenge identified by participants was the difficulty in managing diverse academic responsibilities simultaneously. Many emphasized that the expectation to excel in research, coupled with the requisite obligations of teaching, service, and leadership, has become increasingly untenable. This observation aligns with a growing body of evidence in academia, where there is a rising incidence of burnout attributed to conflicting role demands. It suggests a pressing need for institutions to reassess workload distribution and enhance support mechanisms to mitigate burnout and promote a sustainable work-life balance. Specifically, Participant #5 articulated the burden of navigating various responsibilities, including leadership and teaching, underscoring the complexity of their academic roles:

"So, it's a matter of the space that I find myself at, where I, as a newly appointed person in the space of my faculty, having a leadership role that I need to play, that I'm still playing, but again, the teaching workload and with all other roles that I am playing."

Participant #7 highlighted:

"I need to balance them, which is a difficult challenge to achieve. The challenge is not to say I cannot publish in a high-impact journal, but to make time for that because writing an article is not difficult for me, because I know what is expected when I write an article."

Time limitations dictate a necessary balance in the research process, particularly regarding manuscript submission and the publication timeline in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. Participant #1 notably emphasized the challenge of meeting these expectations, highlighting the difficulties faced in aligning the timelines with the process's demands.

"I know that I have to look at several journals, specific journals that I want to publish in, and I have to look at the requirements of those journals. I have to look at the impact factor of that journal ... those aspects I understand need to be accredited. But the challenge is the time needed to do all that."

Participant #7 noted:

"Those aspects I understand, you see, but now, creating more time for myself so that I can be productive and balance with all the other roles that I have to play. That's where my challenge has been as an individual."

In reiteration, Participant 6 stated that:

"But also, research is one of the major things that you need to account for anywhere at any level. But the time given to it is not that much because we are dealing with a required number of students. If you are teaching 300 students and 150 students, and we are expected to mark them, report their progress, and then deal with their individual issues, it's quite exhausting."

The findings highlight a persistent challenge in academia: the struggle to balance multiple academic responsibilities. Participants expressed frustration over the increasingly untenable

expectations to excel in research while managing demanding teaching loads and administrative roles. The researchers argue that this aligns with a broader academic discourse on burnout and role conflict, where excessive workloads undermine research productivity and well-being. Time constraints emerged as a key barrier, with participants acknowledging their understanding of high-impact publishing requirements but lacking the dedicated time to meet these expectations. The institutional emphasis on research output exacerbates this struggle, as participants felt pressured to publish despite limited opportunities to engage in sustained scholarly work.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how institutional promotion practices shape, support, or conflict with academics' professional identities. Anchored in SIT, developed by Tajfel (1974) and expanded by Tajfel and Turner (1979), the study examined how institutional expectations influence academics' self-perception, career decision-making, and role prioritization. SIT emphasizes that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-worth through membership in social groups, such as their professional communities. The processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison are central to how individuals position themselves within group hierarchies and derive meaning from their roles (Miller, 2016; Molenberghs, 2013; Venu et al., 2021). In academic settings, institutional promotion criteria act as key mechanisms for defining in-group norms, shaping how academics construct their professional identities. When institutional values prioritize research over other roles such as teaching, leadership, or community engagement, they signal which identities are privileged, thus influencing how academics categorize themselves and align their professional goals. The literature on academic promotion and career advancement emphasizes different approaches to progressing in academic roles. Szromek and Wolniak (2020) distinguish between competitive and promotion models of career advancement, noting that the former emphasizes competition for limited roles while the latter focuses on meeting performance benchmarks. This distinction reflects broader institutional practices that shape academics' career trajectories. Additionally, Dawson et al. (2022) argue that academic promotions increasingly require excellence across research, teaching, and service, yet in practice, institutions tend to reward research disproportionately. Subbaye (2018) similarly observes that despite policy efforts to recognize teaching, research output remains the dominant criterion in promotion decisions. Schimanski and Alperin (2018) further critique the overemphasis on research productivity, warning that such an imbalance marginalizes other academic roles and shapes professional identities in narrow ways. These scholarly arguments affirm the claim by SIT that group norms—in this case, institutional expectations—profoundly shape identity, favoring those who align with the dominant in-group (researchers) while relegating others to the periphery.

Findings from this study confirm a fundamental misalignment between institutional promotion practices and the professional identities of academics. While participants demonstrated a clear understanding of their institution's promotion policies, they perceived a disconnect between the formal promotion criteria and how these are applied within their faculties. Consistent with Szromek and Wolniak (2020), participants noted that although policies mention multiple KPAs, research productivity carries greater weight in promotion decisions. This perceived imbalance fostered role conflict, especially among academics whose professional priorities lie in teaching, leadership, or community engagement. Participants expressed frustration that their contributions outside research were undervalued, echoing Barrow and Grant's (2019) finding that institutional commitments to equity in promotion are often rhetorical, with meritocratic models privileging research output. Through the lens of SIT, this signals a dominant in-group identity centered on research excellence. Academics who identify more strongly with teaching or service roles thus find themselves in identity conflict, forced to either conform to institutional expectations or risk marginalization.

The study identified role prioritization as a factor contributing to identity dissonance, stemming from the perceived overemphasis on certain KPAs relative to others. Many participants voiced a

tension between their passion for teaching and the institutional pressure to produce high-impact publications. According to SIT, such experiences are rooted in the internalization of institutional group norms—academics feel valued only when they align with research-focused identities. This alignment is not only strategic but also psychological, as individuals strive to maintain a positive self-concept within the institutional group. When academics perceive their strengths as devalued, their sense of belonging and professional self-worth is undermined. Participants reported feeling pressured to redirect their energy toward producing high-impact publications, even at the expense of job satisfaction or authenticity. These findings are in line with Bates and Schrewe (2016), who describe the promotion process as opaque and inconsistent, generating uncertainty and disillusionment that further destabilize professional identity.

Additionally, the study elucidated the multifaceted challenges encountered by academics in reconciling their diverse roles, which resonates with the extant literature on academic burnout and role conflict. The study highlighted the emotional and practical burden of balancing multiple academic roles under increasing institutional pressure. Participants described how time constraints and excessive workloads limited their capacity to pursue meaningful teaching or research, contributing to professional burnout. This resonates with findings by Dawson et al. (2022), who argue that the expectation to excel simultaneously in research, teaching, and service is not only unrealistic but unsustainable. From an SIT perspective, this can be interpreted as the psychological strain of maintaining an in-group identity that does not reflect one's authentic professional self. The dissonance between personal values and institutional norms fosters internal conflict as academics struggle to reconcile who they are with who they are expected to be. Moreover, the pressure to conform to the dominant research identity reduces space for diverse identity expressions, marginalizing hybrid or teaching-centered academic pathways.

7. Conclusion, Suggestions, and Implications

This research examined the pronounced tensions faced by academics at a South African HEI between institutional mandates and their professional identities. Social identity theory provides a compelling framework for understanding how institutional promotion systems act as mechanisms of social categorization, determining who is valued, included, and supported in their professional growth. When promotion systems disproportionately reward one KPA over another, they reinforce a narrow definition of academic success, alienating those whose strengths and aspirations lie elsewhere. A more balanced promotion model—one that genuinely values teaching, service, leadership, and community engagement alongside research—would not only foster greater equity but also enhance academics' professional identity cohesion, well-being, and career satisfaction. Ultimately, aligning institutional recognition with the diverse identities and contributions of academics is essential for cultivating a more inclusive and sustainable academic culture. To foster equity and inclusivity in academic career progression, institutions should implement alternative promotion tracks that align with individual strengths, such as teaching-focused, research-focused, or service-/leadership-focused pathways. Additionally, while faculty-specific promotion criteria provide flexibility, harmonizing these standards across faculties can ensure consistency and fairness. Evaluation systems should also balance KPAs to prevent the dominance of research metrics from undermining other vital roles, such as teaching and community engagement. To support academics navigating these varied demands, institutions must restructure workloads, provide research support, and reduce administrative burdens. Finally, cultivating identity-sensitive leadership through training can promote trust, motivation, and belonging, particularly for early-career academics.

8. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into the intersection of institutional promotion practices and academics' professional identities, several limitations must be acknowledged.

- First, the study was conducted at one South African university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Promotion policies, institutional cultures, and academic expectations may differ across universities and regions.

- Second, the use of a qualitative design with a relatively small sample size limits the extent to which findings can be generalized. However, the study offers in-depth, contextualized insights that are analytically transferable.

- Third, the study relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by personal perceptions or biases. Although efforts were made to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, responses may not fully capture the complexity of institutional processes.

- Fourth, while the focus was on academic perspectives, including the views of institutional leaders and promotion committee members could have provided a more holistic understanding of policy formulation and implementation.

Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-methods approaches, expanding the sample across multiple institutions, and including additional stakeholders in the academic promotion ecosystem. Future research could also involve larger, cross-institutional, and international studies to explore diverse promotion models and their impact on professional identity. Longitudinal studies could track how academic identities change with policy shifts, assessing the relationship between institutional expectations and career satisfaction. Additionally, examining the effects of inclusive promotion policies on job satisfaction and retention would provide valuable insights for creating supportive academic environments.

Declarations

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