

The Development of Professional Identity among Lesotho University Lecturers

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Abstract- For university lecturers, professional identities are constructed within discipline-based cultures and the profession itself. With the view that professional identity is acquired through investigating a combination of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and occupational commitment, this study set out to describe job experiences which influenced the development of professional identity among university lecturers in Lesotho. Utilizing narrative inquiry among a sample of 15 academics, this study describes work experiences within discipline-based cultures which impact on the development of professional identities. The findings showed that academics had the ability to make their own professional choices and realize their own interests against the background of the institution's conditions, culture, demands and constraints. Thus professional identities at the university were based on sets of meanings that academics held for themselves that defined 'what it meant' to be who they were as individuals and role players.

Index Terms- Professional identity, narratives, interactionism, university lecturers, higher education, Lesotho.

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic occupations are principally high-status, knowledge-based occupations displaying the hallmarks of a profession; they are characterized by abstract specialized knowledge, the right to exercise autonomous professional judgment as well as altruism (Hodson & Sullivan, 2008:258; Hooley, 2007:50). Since the core of academic work rests on research, teaching and community service, how academics see and experience their professional identity is indivisible from their identity as academics. It influences the way they teach, participate in professional learning activities and attach value to what they do. Nevertheless, it is a fact that many university lecturers enter higher education teaching with no prior professional training in pedagogy; rather they are recruited on the strength of their qualifications and many gain experience through trial-and-error (Komba, Anangisye & Katabaro, 2013:191). This realization led scholars, such as Bromme (1991), to view professional identity of university lecturers as subject or discipline-based.

Recently, however, other elements such the teaching and professional ethics became incorporated into professional identity (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000) leading to the perception that the professional identity of university lecturers is located somewhere between commitment to professional ethics/standards and an ability to progress within a profession (Komba et al., 2013). Thus, university lecturers' professional identity it is part of how they present themselves and wish to be perceived and recognized by others in the broader professional community (Bitzer & De Jager, 2016; Lieff, Baker, Mori, Egan-Lee, Chin, & Reeves, 2012). Furthermore, some authors argue that the professional identity development "might be different for university teachers since they have to combine the teaching role with other roles such as that of researcher or practitioner" (Van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset & Beishuizen, 2017: 326).

The development of professional identity

A professional is a person who does skilled work to achieve a useful social goal (Lane, 2018). Conversely, professional identity is defined as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999). Professional identity also refers to "one's professional self-concept, based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences" (Slay & Smith, 2011:86). Robson (1998:586) views it as "the perception of oneself as a professional and it is closely related to the knowledge and skills one has, the work one does and the work-related to the significant others or the reference group". Therefore professional identities derive from a profession; they influence self-definitions and shape how others think about the professional as an individual. For that reason, professional identity can be thought of as the constellation of attributes, beliefs and values that people use to define themselves in specialized, skill- and education-based occupations or vocations (Slay & Smith, 2011:87).

For academics, professional identities are constructed within discipline-based cultures (Clarke, Hyde & Drennan, 2013) and the profession itself (Pifer & Baker, 2014:118). Most contemporary approaches to professional identity recognize this and are in consensus that professional identities; (1) are developed within an established social context and (2) are shifting and dynamic rather

than stable and fixed (Neary, 2014; Vandeyar, 2010; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Wenger (1998:51) uses the concept of 'communities of practice' (CoP) to define professional practice as a process in which people experience the social world and their engagement in it as being meaningful. Practice then is about meaning as an experience of everyday life. Wenger (1998:149) further argues that participation within CoPs has three dimensions: (1) it improves mutual engagement; (2) it builds trust between members; and (3) it allows the discussion of issues pertaining to the practice. Others also contend that, it keeps the CoP together and builds a sense of accountability to a body of knowledge; and it helps members develop a shared repertoire, inclusive of routines, words, tools and stories within the practice (Ruuska & Vartiainen, 2003:172).

Accordingly, professional identities are both individual and social; and they play an integral role in academic staffs' wellbeing and productivity (Clarke et al., 2013; Lieff et al., 2012). Kelchtermans (1993, 2009) states that professional identity evolves overtime through 5 stages, namely: (1) self-image (how one describes oneself); (2) self-esteem (how good/bad one is defined by others); (3) job motivation (what makes one choose, remain committed or leave the job); (4) task perception (how one defined their job); and (5) future perspective (one's future career expectations). In line with Kelchtermans (2009) and Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink and Hofman (2012), I believe an indication of university lecturers' professional identity is acquired through investigating their self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and occupational commitment in their combination .

Research into the construction of professional identities highlights this. It cites family, cultural values, personal experiences and self-reflection on own identity as some of the factors which influence the construction of professional identities (Slay & Smith, 2011). For example, Barbara-i-Molinero, Cascon-Pereira, Hernandez-Lara (2017) found that social experiences, the educational context, perceived congruence with the profession, professional experience, personal development and self-engagement influenced professional development in higher education. Similarly, Bitzer and De Jager (2016) investigated chartered accountants' perceptions and preferences regarding their own professional identity and found that professional identity was not a stable construct; rather it was associated with personal choices and influenced by contextual factors. Komba et al (2013) also found that exposure to new challenges, interactions with colleagues and students, experience in teaching, self-discipline, personal effort and international exposure helped to improve professional identity. Besides professional roles and CoPs, academic professional identities are also said to be influenced by ascribed traits, socialization and values academics bring into their work (Wharton et al., 2000:68) as well as the attitudes (brought by diverse work experiences) they maintain towards their jobs (Celik, Man, Modrak, Dima, & Pachura, 2011:8). Nevertheless, it is important to note that, the construction of professional identity often seems problematic for university lecturers especially as their job requires them to juggle expectations, roles and employment conditions (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). Even so, since academics tend to experience tension from the institutional social context when attempting to develop professional identities (Vandeyar, 2010:917), this study will explore how professional identities develop in the context of the Lesotho higher education sector with the aim of showing that their professional self-images are a subject to the work environment, the institution and themselves as individuals.

Theorizing professional identity

What is an identity? Gee (2000:1) defines it as "being recognized as a certain kind of person in a given context". In this sense, everybody has multiple identities connected to their performances in society. Similar to identity, professional identity is a definition that professionals use when they try to define themselves and communicate this to significant others within occupational contexts (Neary, 2014). The 'context' has an important role in identity development as it reflects how individuals see themselves and how they enact their roles within different settings. It is for this reason that Bullough (2005:146) states that identity development is not a passive activity, "it involves giving and withholding which simultaneously alters oneself and one's context, with the result that alternative identities may form". In short, an identity establishes a "link between the individual and the social structure" (Callero, 1992:485); it is the experience of oneself constructed in relation to the social world and it exists "only insofar as a person participates in social relationships" (Stone, 1962).

Professional identities are essentially 'social' and 'personal'; they comprise how individuals view themselves based on their qualifications, characteristics and values. Professional identity may also be seen as a response to socio-cultural values, work-place discourses, practices and norms as understood and contested within any social group (Murray, Czerniawski & Kidd, 2019). There are varying understandings of the development of professional identity. For example, Ibarra (1999) argues that it is due to work socialization and observation of peers; Larson (1977) contends that it is the result of shared expertise; while Hughes (2013) views it as a result of shared normative practice. It can be argued then that professional identity is a dynamic concept; it is developed and refined in interaction (and reflection of that interaction) with others (Schmidt, 2014). Similarly, this article approached identity from a structural approach to identity formation which views an identity as the result of the relationship between the individual and society. Thus, it views an identity as a set of meanings that define who one is as an occupant of a role, a member of a particular group or claims characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person (Burke & Stets, 2009:3).

Amongst the structural approaches to identity, Burke's (1980) cognitive approach to identity theory (CAIT) was adopted. Burke's (1980) CAIT focuses on the "internal dynamics that operate for any one identity" (Burke & Stets, 2009:48). It delineates five theoretical properties of identities from an interactionist view of the self; self-meanings, relational, reflexive, affecting behaviour and

motivating (MacKinnon, 1994:88). Firstly, identities are viewed as 'self-meanings' derived from significant others' reactions to individual's words, acts and appearances (MacKinnon, 1994:89). Burke (1980) refers to the meaning of identity as one's role identity which comes to be known through interaction. Thus meaning of identities does not stand in isolation; rather it can only be understood in the context of particular network of other role identities (Callero, 1992:485). Secondly, identities are seen as 'relational'. According to Burke (1980) this may happen in 3 ways: (1) identities may be related to roles; (2) identities may be related to other identities; and (3) identities may be learned by relating to others (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; MacKinnon, 1994). Sluss and Ashforth (2007) add that relational identity integrates the individual, interpersonal and collective levels of the self. Thirdly, identities are 'reflexive'. This implies that individuals have the ability to reflect and consider who they are in relation to others. Thus the reflexive self develops in the interaction with others through a process that includes a person's self-efficacy, self-image, self-concept and self-esteem (Falk & Miller, 1997). Giddens (2016) adds that individuals do not just take for granted or inherit identities; instead, they actively shape, reflect on and monitor themselves. Thus identities become 'projects', something individuals actively construct. Fourthly, identities 'affect behaviour indirectly'.

Lastly, identities are 'motivating'. According to Oyserman, Lewis, Yan, Fisher, O'Donnell and Horowitz (2017:140) people are motivated to act and make sense of the world using their identities. This is because identities have value; thus people prefer to act and make sense of situations in identity-confirming ways. "The implication is that people are motivated to regulate their behavior, to work toward desired and away from undesired future identities, and to act in ways that fit who they are now and want to become" (Oyserman et al., 2017:140). Accordingly, Burke (1991:837) views identities as a set of meanings applied to the self as an actor in a social role or situation which defines what it means to be who one is.

In terms of professional identities, Burke's (1980) approach shows them as not only being reflexive and symbolic in nature but also as realised through interaction between actors and others (Burke & Reitzes, 1991:84). For example, Bitzer and De Jager (2016) investigated chartered accountants' perceptions and preferences regarding their own professional identity and found that professional identity was not a stable construct; rather it was associated with personal choices and influenced by contextual factors. Komba et al (2013) also investigated factors which led to changes in professional identity and found that exposure to new challenges, interaction with colleagues, interaction with students, experience in teaching, self-discipline, personal effort and international exposure helped to improve professional identity.

Purpose and questions

"Professionally, who and what am I?" (Curle, 1969:9). According to Schmidt (2014) this is the one question that professionals have asked themselves most frequently during their careers as one's identity is often closely related to their profession. Surprisingly, professional identity is an area that has not been researched about in any great depth among professions, especially in higher education (Bitzer & De Jager, 2016; Beijjaard et al, 2004; Clarke et al., 2013). As such, more needs to be known about how academic staff come to possess the constructs and ideas that inform their professional identity (Clarke et al., 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe job experiences within discipline-based cultures which influence the development of professional identity among university lecturers. In addressing this, three issues were inquired into, namely:

1. Which aspects of academic work enhance or diminish the development of professional identities?
2. How do contextual factors such as daily work interactions between academics, students and colleagues within and outside the university shape professional identities?
3. Which factors influence intention to sustain academic professional identities at the university?

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative methods were used to describe job experiences which influenced the development professional identity among university lecturers. The National University of Lesotho (NUL), as a leading institution of higher learning in Lesotho, was used as a case study. The target population included all academic staff employed at NUL (regardless of type of employment contract or duration of employment). Purposive sampling was employed to identify 15 participants across NUL's seven (7) faculties (Social Science, Humanities, Law, Science & Technology, Education, Agriculture and Health Sciences) with different levels of academic rank, specialization, experience and qualifications to suit the objectives of the study. All participants provided written consent before participating in the study. Recruitment and study procedure were conducted in the participants' various departments. At the time of the study the interviews were conducted in lecturer's own offices to ensure visual and audio privacy. Using narrative inquiry research design, this study adopted an experience-centered narrative approach which assumes that narratives are sequential, meaningful and represent real human experiences (Squire, 2013:48).

In-depth interviews were used as research tools to collect the data. The interview guide sought views of participants with regard to aspects and context of academic work which enhanced or diminished professional identities and whether they intended sustaining academic professional identities at NUL. Data was collected in the form of personal narratives of experience (where participants told stories of long terms aspects of their career in academe) using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide organised to facilitate

narrative analysis. Interviews were conducted in English; audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed with key identifying information removed from the transcripts. The data were then analyzed using thematic narrative analysis and this resulted in the identification of three main themes and their associated sub-themes. Firstly data were prepared and themes of analysis defined to ensure that the content analysed was based on the purpose of the research. This was followed by the development of categories and coding schemes and finally coding of all textual data. Finally inferences were made based on the codes (Datt, 2016).

III. RESULTS

Participants' viewpoints

The study had a total of 15 participants (8 men and 7 women), with specializations in law, humanities, social sciences, agriculture, health sciences, pure sciences, technology/ engineering, and education. Their qualifications ranged from Masters to PhD and they were spread over the academic ranks of lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and full professor. The narratives provided below are excerpts from the interviews held with participants. They show that professional identities derive from various facets of academic work, unique histories, ethical backgrounds, and who identifies with their discipline-based cultures.

'A matter of choice'

The findings revealed that professional identities derived from the autonomy experienced in academic work. For some, this was expressed through self-determined work behaviour where academics were able to 'design' how their work was to be executed. This feeling of being in charge of one's work was also observed in how academics took responsibility for their work, "I always bring my own equipment to work to teach students with it. The students need this from me and I can't get help, so I help myself in that way (Pamela, Law)". Participants also reported being able to determine the 'pace' of their work while others enjoyed the 'freedom and flexibility' inherent in academic work. However, it soon became apparent that autonomy in academic work was valued due to academics' dislike of close supervision or somebody 'telling them what to do': "I don't have an immediate boss who is after me all the time. I feel like a professional. I feel there is err...that confidence in me. I try to do things responsibly" (Mandy, Humanities).

It was also realized that the autonomy and flexibility in academic work influenced job commitment:

"I have been getting offers and I decline them. I got an offer from a bank but the setting there...; we are so many in the hall. Everybody in his cubicle facing that way...you're all around. There I don't think I would be free" (Rosa, Social Sciences).

However, the findings also revealed that perceived and experienced independence in academic work was actually socially constructed and not a permanent feature of academic work at the university; that is, it was determined by the group and was negotiated over-time. Initially, it emerged that the ability to negotiate autonomy at work depended on the type of employment contract one had as an academic. For example, part-time lecturers were found to be free of work obligations that were normative for tenured members of department, "Part-time lecturers just come to teach classes assigned to them...and mark the student-assessment work, that's all" (Mark, Social Sciences). Thus, while part-time academic staff felt more liberated and in control of their work, full-time academics had to sacrifice their personal time in order to keep up with the demands of their work, "I push myself to do my heavy work-load in time. Imagine, teaching, marking, student consultations, committees, meetings and minutes. All that I have to squeeze in somehow, so I really apply myself to finish" (Emily, Humanities). The need to 'push' to finish assigned tasks was found to be born from two realizations. Firstly, that the university operated in an environment of inadequate resources, yet work had to be carried out regardless. Secondly, that NUL management could logically not expect high quality performance or morally hold academics accountable for substandard work when it did not provide adequate job aids. However, it was clear that some academics genuinely cared for their work despite resource constraints at the university:

"I tell myself that I have to do the work which I like, no matter the limitations of infrastructure or financial support. I realized long ago that crying that 'hey I can't do my work because of 1, 2, and 3' is a waste of time. It must be done... dark or blue and nobody can complain to me about the quality as long as it's done" (Isaac, Education).

The findings also revealed that some academics had initially struggled to gain recognition and status within the group upon arrival as new recruits. Rather, it came overtime when they had gotten used to the politics of the group. Nonetheless, these initial feelings of perceived powerlessness and low status within the group left academics feeling like second-class citizens which enhanced feelings of frustration due to perceived unequal treatment:

"When I first came here I was given another Course apart from what I specialize in. So I found myself doing what other people did not want to do. Kind of forced to lecture...because other people wanted to do their PhDs. When I got used to the system, I said 'No, I must do those things that I am trained for and specialized in'. So I started dropping that Course and doing more of my specialization" (Amanda, Health Sciences).

Besides this, academics also had to adhere to university rules and regulations when carrying out their duties regardless of whether it interfered with other planned activities or not, "I dislike the time-table... so almost every day I teach early in the morning and late in the afternoon. That makes me unhappy because I have other things to do" (Beatrice, Health Sciences).

'It's a good headache'

Sense of accomplishment academics found in their work was found to influence not only the positive attitudes they had for their jobs, but it also helped them to construct a professional self based on experiences of achieving goals under strenuous work situations, "I remember one day I had so many things to do regarding teaching and supervision of students. When I went home that day I felt that I had accomplished something. I had a headache that day, but I felt that...it was a good headache" (Catherine, Law). Even so, it was not just work-related accomplishments that influenced the professional identity of participants. For some, it was seeing their students grow and progress academically and finally graduate while for others, it was students excelling professionally which gave a sense of accomplishment:

"When I meet my former students and they tell me 'we are beginning to appreciate what you taught us when we were in school'. You begin to understand that 'ok I am making a certain contribution to the nation'" (Maxwell, Social Sciences).

It also emerged from the findings that professional identity hinged on identification with teaching, research and community service roles. Amongst participants who identified with their professions, it was realized that the 'connection' to practice they felt working at the university enhanced their professional identity, "I have a deep passion for pharmacy and for the practice of the industry. So I feel that connection between my job here and the practice" (Amanda, Health Sciences). Participants who identified with their profession also noted a strong need to pass on and/or instill the professional principles into protégés:

"I must say I am a very passionate nutritionist. Nutrition is my passion and it is something that I want to instill in the students that we teach. When I see that students are not catching what I am saying, it's like I could get into them and make them understand as I would like them to" (Beatrice, Health Sciences).

For participants who identified with their roles as researchers, their professional identity was enhanced by being innovative, coming up 'with new things' and publishing in refereed journals. It also emerged from the findings that participants recognized that enacting their research roles was also key in getting recognition in the form of academic titles and ascending to the upper echelons of academia:

"If you want to be somebody you must work hard. I'm sure it's nice to be called doctor or professor, so I feel like 'hey man, just keep pushing. A little mounts up to a lot in time'. So I try hard to engage in the publishing game from time to time. Right now I have bagged some articles. Now when Calls for Promotions come, I just tell myself 'next year I qualify'. I can't wait"(Thomas, Agriculture).

However, it emerged that inasmuch as promotion criteria required academic staff to publish, was clearly spelled out for them, it was not a straightforward exercise. Academics still to adhere to university rules for promotion regardless of whether they qualified for promotions or not. This frustrated academics and led them to consider resigning from their work at the university:

"Recently I applied for promotion. I was meeting the requirements but they said I don't qualify due to the fact that I don't have six years to qualify for the promotion. Those are the things or reasons that would have influenced me to quit" (Felicity, Education).

It was also realized that participants who identified with their research roles as academics were aware that structural constraints in the form of lack of resources was a constant threat to the construction of this identity at the university, "You need to have a lot of materials...without them one would be handicapped" (John, Science & Technology). This was found to be a source of frustration among academics as stated by Martin (Science & Technology):

"The expectation to do research, without providing us with the necessary materials and things to do our work as lecturers...to talk about quality, to talk about this and that... it's really very annoying. But prior to that, one has to put things in order. If the department or the faculty does not have the necessary budget to grant the department particularly the practical aspect and so on and the facilities, then we may not deliver... you know things that are expected from us. So the expectations and the realities do not match".

It also emerged from the findings that some participants identified with opportunities to develop and grow that the university offered its academic staff, "My job keeps me on my toes because as a lecturer you can't relax and say what I studied in 1980 still works now (John, Science & Technology). It also emerged that staying relevant could be achieved by either keeping up with recent subject-based developments, through study leaves, or through attending conferences. Interestingly participants seemed to be aware that it was only if they stayed in academia that they could remain relevant academically, "If I leave the university I will not have time to learn about issues that are emanating from the subject itself" (Felicity, Education). Participants also felt like their jobs afforded them academic growth which not only benefited them as individually but also enhanced students' learning experiences. Nevertheless, there were some participants who were unhappy with resources allocated to growth and development at the university:

“They should give us enough research allowance so that we can publish. They must also increase conference grants so we can go to conferences and you see when you go to conferences, you’re not going for yourself alone you go on behalf of the university and on behalf of Lesotho. I went to a conference in Hong Kong and that was the first time many people heard about Lesotho. Yes, it opens up this country to the academic world to find out, and I got some Chinese friends who seem eager to visit Lesotho” (Catherine, Law).

Thus staying relevant seems to highlight the fact that academics need to remain competitive and relevant as professionals in the workplace. Thus professional identity seems to be influenced by the need to test knowledge, to advance careers and to become more effective in work roles.

‘Draining but rewarding’

Participants were of the view that working at the university was draining yet rewarding. Interactions between academic staff and their students were found to be key in these perceptions. For some participants, there was an acknowledgement that interactions with students were interesting, rewarding and enjoyable. There was also a recognition that academic work contributed to the social exposure that academics valued, which left them feeling appreciated and esteemed. Conversely, academic work was said to be draining, with some participants complaining that class sizes at the university were too big, leaving them feeling emotionally, physically and mentally exhausted:

“The classes are so big that sometimes we even compromise what we are giving students. For instance, now we hardly...sometimes we don’t give these students the required number of tests. Under normal circumstances we have to give them the minimum of three pieces of work so as to be able to calculate their coursework. But sometimes you find that you are forced to confine yourself just to two; why? Because the numbers are so big. You teach a number of courses with large numbers and it becomes very, very difficult” (Maxwell, Social Sciences).

Some participants expressed concern over students’ lack of interest in their studies; they complained that students at the university had a culture of showing up for class and expecting lecturers to spoon-feed them “You teach so many and so few actually participate to see whether they hear you or not. Sometimes it’s like you are talking to air” (Chris, Agriculture). Other participants reported that students’ academic results did not reflect the hard work that they as lecturers put in teaching:

“Marking is so draining; especially to mark students who give you back what you taught them. Really, it’s tiring. You know sometimes they give you the same examples you gave them in class? It’s so incredible how they just take their studies so lightly like that” (Chris, Agriculture).

Besides attitudes toward general learning, students’ were also said to be truant and even when in attendance they were non-participative in class which affected academics’ professional self-images negatively. Participants also reported being surprised when they administered tests that they had many more students registered for courses who were not attending classes regularly. “You can find out that probably in the class maybe of 147 maybe 40 or 50 students are not in. That I discovered when giving them test scripts, so that is a big challenge” (Maxwell, Social Sciences). It also emerged that sometimes students who carried forward failed courses experienced double-booking which negatively affected their class attendance, “Sometimes when you go to class, you find that there are no students because apparently your class clashes with another class” (Emily, Humanities). Other issues mentioned by participants referred to plagiarism amongst students and recurrent student riots at the university caused mainly by delays in the administration of bursaries and student stipends. Even so, most participants were happy with relationships with colleagues; workplace alliances and relationships were found to afford participants a chance to learn about other disciplines:

“Interacting with other people... we are so many here and of different disciplines. I practically got a friend in every faculty and I tend to learn a lot from them. I mean now I can tell you a lot about women in law because I like to interact with ladies in the faculty of Law” (Amanda, Health Sciences).

Although professional self-images benefited from the cordial relations between academics and their colleagues, it emerged that some academics had experienced the opposite; some had not been oriented into their various roles and responsibilities as academics which left them feeling isolated and overwhelmed by their work while others encountered problems of assimilation into the system.

IV. DISCUSSION

The literature states that university lecturers’ professional identity develops through a combination of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and occupational commitment (Canrinus et al., 2012; Kelchtermans, 2009). The study’s theoretical framework (structural symbolic interactionism) holds a similar view. It states that every identity has self-meanings that affect behaviour and motivate individuals, it is also relational and reflexive (MacKinnon, 1994). Similarly, the study revealed that professional identities at NUL derived from the nature of academic work itself; it allowed the exercise of self-efficacy through job autonomy, control and flexibility. However, it was realized that the perceived independence in academic work was actually temporary and hinged on adherence to institutionalized norms and tenure. The findings also revealed that power relations within discipline based cultures influenced the professional identity of academics. Further, the findings showed that university lecturers at NUL identified more with their teaching

when compared to research and/or community service. This perception was found to enhance positive attitudes towards work. It also emerged from the findings that opportunities (although they were limited by lack of resources) to develop and grow that the university as well as the perception that academic work afforded lecturers academic growth enhanced occupational commitment.

Overall, the study showed that professional identity developed from how university lecturers perceived themselves based on their interpretations of their continuing interaction with their context (Kelchtermans, 2009). Thus the study showed that academic professional identities are influenced by interactions with others within discipline-based cultures (Clarke et al., 2013), the profession itself (Pifer & Baker, 2014:118) and the attitudes academics maintain towards their jobs (whether good/bad), resulting from diverse features of their work and experiences (Celik et al, 2011:8). Similar to Van Lankveld et al (2017), interactions with students were described as strengthening for academic professional identities. Similarly, the study found that participants' professional identity was enhanced by enjoyment of teaching and collaborations with colleagues. It was also enhanced by professional autonomy, innovativeness, and being acknowledged and appreciated by others. Conversely, similar to Van Lankveld et al (2017), academics at the university complained about the context of their work (general working conditions and students' learning culture) which were found to even influence their intention to quit academe.

The study draws attention to the view that professional academic identities are "co-constructions with an individual's traits, beliefs and commitments" (Taylor, 2008:29) derived from the work they do (Barbara-i-Molinero et al., 2017). That is, academic professional identities derive from academics' entire thoughts, feelings, self-evaluations and imaginations of who they are; thus they are meanings that they hold about themselves, based on their observations, inferences, wishes, desires and how others act toward them (Stets & Burke, 2003:5). Consequently, it was evident in the findings that Burke's (1980) cognitive approach could be used to theorize the development of professional identities as it showed that they are not only reflexive and symbolic in nature, but they are also realized through interaction between actors and others (Burke & Reitzes, 1991:84). Thus professional identities among academics at the university were found to be based on sets of meanings that academics hold for themselves that define 'what it means' to be who they are as individuals and as role players (Burke, 2004:5).

V. CONCLUSION

Thus professional identity is a multi-layered concept, often interpreted in terms of individual's self-perceptions as part of their professional practice (Canrinus, 2011). Against this background this study sought to describe job experiences within discipline-based cultures which influence the professional identity of university lecturers and show which aspects of their work enhanced or diminished the development of professional identities. The study showed that the context and interactions with others within it were crucial to this construction of professional selves. Similar to Barbara-i-Molinero et al (2017), the study found that social experiences, the educational context, perceived congruence with the profession, professional experience, opportunities for personal development and self-engagement influenced professional development at NUL. The study also established that academic staff at NUL identified more with their teaching roles (Komba et al., 2013) and this together with the alignment of individual expectations, professional values and working conditions determined the development of professional self-concepts. This confirmed Van Lankveld et al's (2017) statement that perceptions of the work environment as collegial and supportive enhanced professional identities. This study therefore concludes that academic staffs' professional identities are key in the way they assign meanings to themselves; hence they help academics claim purpose and meaning from their work (Slay & Smith, 2011:87). Therefore Burke's (1991:837) view that identities as sets of meanings applied to the self as an actor in a social role or a situation which defines what it means to be who one is has been confirmed.

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