

## Typical career dilemmas of academic staff during the early career phase within a changing South African higher education institution

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*Job satisfaction is of great importance for any organization, including higher education institutions, as it impacts on productivity. Higher education institutions need to identify, and familiarise themselves with, the career dilemmas of their employees. Then they can more effectively introduce mechanisms to support and assist academic staff to manage these dilemmas effectively. Our objective was to determine the career dilemmas of academic staff during the early career stage within a changing South African higher education institution. The data were obtained by means of the Delphi technique in order to cater for the specific and unique individual dilemmas. Respondents were randomly divided into four panels according to gender and race. A response rate of 88% to 100% was obtained from the panel members during the respective rounds. The most prominent career dilemmas that were identified included performance management and promotion; role overload and role conflict; financial remuneration; support regarding research and teaching; discrimination; and certain management matters.*

### Introduction

It is well known that higher education institutions play a fundamental role in achieving social equity and promoting higher levels of economic and social development. Higher education institutions are however characterised by constant change and turbulence owing to factors such as globalisation, new technology, and national macro-economic and fiscal policies and circumstances (Barkhuizen, Rothman & Tytherleigh, 2004:2; Fourie & Fourie, 2001:65; Salmi, 2000:11; Zaharia, 2002:301). Illustrative of this are the structural adjustments and increasing demands regarding accountability and quality assurance that South African higher education institutions (like higher education institutions worldwide) must adhere to.

The success, functioning and sustainability of any higher education institution are however greatly influenced by the extent to which the careers of academic staff are successfully managed amidst all the demands and changes, as indicated in the previous paragraph. More than any other type of organisation, higher education institutions are dependent on the intellectual capital and commitment of their staff (Martin, 1999:100; Oshagbemi, 2000:124; Rowley, 1996:11).

To further exacerbate this situation it is evident from literature that the careers of academic staff in higher education institutions in South Africa — as in the rest of the world — are under tremendous pressure for various reasons, and that, according to Anderson, Richard and Saha (2002:86), a decline in the image and status associated with an academic career can be observed. In a research study conducted by Anderson *et al.* (2002:83-86) among academics in Australian higher education institutions, 79% and 71% of the respondents were, respectively, of the opinion that the image and status of an academic career are declining. However, the realities and changes within higher education as mentioned earlier on do not only affect the image and status of an academic career, but also contribute to problems such as increased job dissatisfaction and work stress and a decline in commitment to the organisation. This dilemma in higher education is illustrated by the results obtained in a national study conducted within

Australian higher education institutions, where 68% of the respondents (academic staff) indicated that departures from higher education were on the increase (Anderson *et al.*, 2002: 92). This problem also seems a reality within South African higher education, since Koen (2003:511) states that data indicate that the rate at which academics are, in fact, leaving higher education institutions is cause for concern. Figures of between 5% and 18% are quoted. Naidu and Govender (2004:5) predict an increasing shortage of academic staff within South African higher education institutions, due to the "brain drain" and more attractive options in the private sector.

Increased labour turnover and reduced commitment from employees — academic staff in this instance — may according to Phillips and Connell (2003:5-6) give rise to the following negative organisational and/or institutional outcomes:

- High direct and indirect financial costs.
- A decline in financial sustainability, which also implies a reduced possibility of survival.
- A decline in productivity, service rendering and standards, as well as an increase in work-flow disruptions.
- Loss of experience and specialist knowledge.
- An increase in administrative processes and a higher administrative workload.
- A decline in the image of the organisation or institution, since this is sometimes accompanied by grievance procedures.
- A disruption of the internal and informal social liaison and communication channels.
- Increased levels of job dissatisfaction among the remaining staff.

According to McCormick and Ilgen (1985:314), and Spector (1997:62), several studies have found a connection between low levels of job satisfaction due to specific career dilemmas and an increased labour turnover. According to Spector (1997:63), studies such as those conducted by Blau, Newton and Thorton indicate a strong connection between job dissatisfaction and the intention of leaving an organisation or employer.

If the career dilemmas of academic staff are therefore not identified and addressed the quality and sustainability of higher education institutions may be jeopardised, since these individuals will increasingly be lost to higher education. Career dilemma(s) are also associated with higher levels of job dissatisfaction and work stress, and aspects such as reduced commitment to the organisation, declining psychological and physical health, problematic interpersonal work relations and a lower quality of worklife (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua & Stough, 2001:55).

More research focusing on the quality of worklife of academics within the South African higher education work environment is necessary according to Monnapula-Mapesela (2002: 143). Cuthbert (1996:54) supports this view and the statement that a study regarding the typical career dilemmas of academic staff is long overdue, and studies in this regard should be considered essential.

## **Purpose**

Therefore if South African higher education institutions, or any organisation for that matter, want to manage, retain, develop and utilise their most expensive commodity, namely, human resources, while ensuring growth and continued existence at the same time, they should understand the careers and the subsequent career dilemmas of employees — academic staff in this instance — as implied by Cuthbert (1996:10-20) and Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk (2000:71).

In view of the above arguments, our purpose was therefore to investigate and identify the typical career dilemmas of academic staff in the early career phase within a changing South African higher education institution. Such academics will play a fundamental role in the survival, sustainability and effective functioning of higher education institutions in future, as they may be regarded as the scholars of tomorrow.

## Method

### Data collection technique

The data in this study were obtained by means of the Delphi data collection process, a technique regarded as a qualitative data collection method by Louw (1997:98), Nel (1994:95) and Tesch (1990:58). The Delphi technique comprises a process during which individual or group perspectives or opinions about a specific topic are obtained and integrated by means of a series of successive, carefully compiled questionnaires (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975:83; Jones, 1980:45; Mullen, 2003:37). More specifically, the technique endeavours to obtain new information among a group of experts regarding a specific matter, in the absence of theories and explanatory models (Gerber, Nel & Van Dyk, 1987:46). An important advantage of the Delphi is that during the first round every respondent gets the opportunity to raise his/her opinions without being influenced by others. In this regard, Jones (1980:45) regards Delphi as one of the most prominent qualitative methods used to obtain new information.

### The constitution and selection of the Delphi panel(s)

The population from which respondents were selected and included in the different Delphi panels consisted of academic staff between the ages of 25 and 39 years of age, employed at a higher education institution. A Delphi study does not involve selecting a probability sample, since a Delphi panel consists of people who will have answer(s) to the questions at hand (Mullen, 2003:38). According to Delbecq *et al.* (1975:89), there is no limitation on the size of the Delphi panel. However, research has indicated that a group of between 10 and 15 individuals is adequate if the panel is of a homogeneous nature, and that few new ideas are generated in a homogeneous group with more than this number of members.

The approval and support of the higher education institution was obtained to approach the academic staff who were representative of the different gender and race groups. A list with the names, surnames and dates of birth of all academic staff employed at the institution, as of October 2003, was then made available by the higher education institution. A total of 38 respondents were thereafter randomly selected from this list, based on their age.

The following panels of respondents were randomly selected from the list provided by the institution:

- Panel 1: consisted of 10 white male academics that were, on the basis of their ages (20–39 years), in the early career phase. These 10 panel members were randomly included in the relevant panel on the basis of their ages.
- Panel 2: consisted of 10 white female academics that were, on the basis of their ages (20–39 years), in the early career phase. These 10 panel members were randomly included in the relevant panel on the basis of their ages.
- Panel 3: consisted of 10 black male academics that were, on the basis of their ages (20–39 years), in the early career phase. These 10 panel members were randomly included in the relevant panel concerned on the basis of their ages.
- Panel 4: consisted of eight black female academics that were, on the basis of their ages

(20–39 years), in the early career phase. The total number of black female academics was included in the relevant panel.

The qualifications and faculty affiliations of the panel members who were involved are represented graphically in the circle diagrams in Figures 1 and 2. These indicate that the respondents represented a broad range of faculties in the institution and that they had different qualifications.

The identified panel members in the different panels were then informed, by means of a covering letter, of the importance and value of the study to the particular institution and the way in which it would be undertaken.

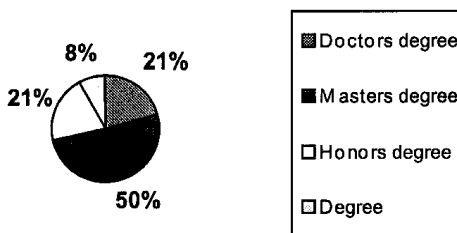


Figure 1 Qualifications of panel members involved in study

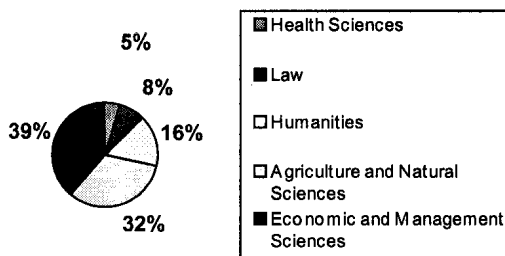


Figure 2 Faculty affiliation of panel members involved in study

### The Delphi question

The format of the question, according to Delbecq *et al.* (1975:86) and Louw (1997:110), holds the key to the Delphi process, since respondents may react inappropriately or feel frustrated with the process right from the start if the panel members do not understand the initial question(s). The authors suggest that the questions asked in the first round should preferably be one or two open-ended questions. In this study, the initial questionnaire and question were developed with the assistance of a panel of experts. The questionnaire was then tested on the sub-panel concerned to determine whether they understood the question, before being finalised and sent to panel members.

In this study, one open-ended question was asked in order to identify the aspects responsible for the career dilemmas of academics in the early career phase. The question was:

Identify the main career dilemmas you are presently experiencing within your work environment.

### The first round

In the first round of the study, panel members were given the opportunity to respond to the above question. The question and instructions were made available in both Afrikaans and English. Enough space was left for the panel members to respond to the question concerned. In the instruction section of the questionnaire, respondents were requested not to feel limited by the writing space allowed when replying to the questions, but to attach additional pages if they required more writing space. The target date for the return of the first round was set at two weeks after the question had been handed over to panel members or, in the case of academic staff located in other centres, after being sent to them. All questionnaires were accompanied by a self-addressed envelope in order to facilitate the dispatch of completed questionnaires. The completed questionnaires were analysed and processed so that the feedback questionnaire for the second round could be based on them. A process of content analysis was used to analyse and process the data received upon completion of the first round. The analysis of data during a qualitative research study therefore involves summarising all the information obtained, as well as representing it in such a way that the most important aspects are highlighted (Hancock, 2002:16). The analysis of the completed first-round questionnaires therefore results in a summary of the data received. This information was submitted to the different panels in the second-round questionnaire for their comments, arguments and amendments (Delbecq *et al.*, 1975:94).

### The second round

The second-round questionnaire consisted of a consolidation of the responses received in the first round from each of the respective panels (Delbecq *et al.*, 1975:97-98; Helmer, 1983:134; Louw, 1997:115 Roodt, 1991:22). As suggested by Delbecq *et al.* (1975:97-98), the questionnaire in the second round reflected the opinions of the respondents regarding the key aspects responsible for their career dilemmas. The same dispatch procedure and built-in mechanisms as used in the first-round questionnaire were followed with the second-round questionnaire. According to Mullen and Spurgeon (2000:91), Delphi studies sometimes make use of more detailed feedback in the form of frequency distributions (both numerical and graphical). The use of frequency distributions to identify correspondence patterns and provide feedback to panel members, is a key characteristic of the Delphi method according to Mckenna (1994:1222). Feedback was thereafter provided separately to each of the four respective panels for their comments.

### Third round

Upon completion of the feedback (round two) panel members for each of the four panels were, once again, given the opportunity to react to or comment on these responses. The purpose of this round was to determine whether additional perspectives had been added, or to amend existing ones. Panel members were asked to check their responses as obtained during round one and reflected in round two. With the exception of three or four panel members, all the panel members indicated that they agreed with the themes as identified during round one and

submitted to them. According to Scheibe, Skutsch and Schofer (1975:272), the number of rounds used during a Delphi study will depend on the extent to which new information is generated. Since no significant or additional information was generated during round two and indicated during round three, a next round was not necessary. The information generated during round one and sent back to the different panels during round two (as summarised in Table 1) therefore represented the results of this study. These are therefore regarded as the primary aspects responsible for the career dilemmas of academic staff during the early career phase for this particular institution.

## Results

A response rate of 100% was obtained from the panel members concerned during round one. The response rate varied between 88% and 100% for the four panels in the second round. This response rate indicated that the process followed to obtain data could be regarded as successful.

The results obtained after a process of response analysis upon completion of round one are indicated in Table 1. In this table, all the aspects responsible for the panel members' career dilemmas are exposed and the frequency for each response is summarised and depicted.

## Discussion

It is evident from Table 1 that performance management and promotion, role overload and role conflict, financial remuneration, support with regard to research and teaching, discrimination and gender issues were the most important career dilemmas being experienced by academics in the early career phase at this particular institution as they accounted for almost 82% of all the responses. In the light of this, the discussion will focus on only these particular aspects.

### Performance management and promotion

Performance management and promotion evidently constituted the most important career dilemma identified by academics in this institution, as 28 responses focused on this particular issue. Unclear guidelines and a lack of transparency with regard to promotion were emphasised, as well as the fact that there were few opportunities for promotion. Double standards with specific reference to promotion, as well as the perception that promotion was linked mainly to research output and not necessarily to the quality of teaching, were other dilemmas identified.

It is evident from the literature (Coetzee, 1999:65; Fairbrother & Warn, 2003:15; McCormick & Ilgen, 1985:310; Miller, 2003:77; Nelson & Burke, 2000:114) that being promoted is particularly important to persons in the early career phase, since it is an indication of growth and development and also increases job satisfaction.

### Role overload and role conflict

It is evident from Table 1 that role overload and role conflict also constituted an important career dilemma for early career phase academics in this institution, as 17 responses were recorded focusing on this particular aspect. White female academics in particular indicated that the pressure to perform in the fields of teaching, research and community service constituted an important career dilemma they were confronted with. It was also primarily white female academics who indicated that they did not have enough time to devote to their own studies and/or research. Possible explanations for this tendency is that academics in the early career phase are generally very involved in lecturing and must first find their feet and establish themselves

**Table 1** Career dilemmas of academics during early career stage according to race and gender

Identified theme	Frequencies per panel of specific theme				
	Panel				Total
	1	2	3	4	
<b>Performance management and promotion</b>					
• Unclear guidelines and lack of transparency with regard to promotion.	2	1		2	5
• Few opportunities for promotion due to affirmative action.	2				2
• Promotion is not based on performance.	2				2
• Double standards, with specific reference to promotion.	1	1		1	3
• Discrimination towards women as far as promotion is concerned.		1			1
• Limited opportunities or possibilities for promotion.		1	2	3	6
• Promotion is based mainly on research output, and not necessarily on the quality of teaching.		3			3
• I cannot make progress — I am presently experiencing a career plateau.				1	1
• Promotion is linked only to qualifications.			1		1
• Promotion is based on the number of published articles.				1	1
• There are specific and strict rules concerning promotion.				1	1
• I do not know what is expected of me.				1	1
• I do not receive any feedback regarding my work.				1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Role overload, role conflict or both</b>					
• Little balance between teaching and research.	1				1
• Conflict between private consultation and academic duties.	1				1
• Pressure to conduct research and get involved in community service studies, while still teaching — differentiated focus areas.	1	5			6
• High work pressure.	1				1
• I do not have enough time to devote to research and my studies, due to a high workload.		4	1		5
• High workload due to high teaching load.		1			1
• I am overworked.			1		1
• I do not know what is expected of me.				1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Financial remuneration</b>					
• Inadequate financial remuneration.	5	2			7
• Financial remuneration does not take place according to performance.	1				1
• Financial remuneration is not market-related.	1		1		2
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>10</b>
<b>Support with regard to research and teaching</b>					
• Little or limited support and capacity development exists with specific reference to research, although great emphasis is placed on it.	1		2		3
• New staff receive little support in preparing for their task as lecturers.		1			1

**Table 1** Continued

Identified theme	Frequencies per panel of specific theme				
	Panel				
	1	2	3	4	Total
• Little support and guidance in the preparation of new staff, with specific reference to research.		1			1
• The research structure is inadequate.			1		1
• I do not possess the skills to publish research articles.			1		1
• I did not receive any clear job description, guidelines or training and support — I was given a textbook, and expected to be productive.				1	1
Total	1	2	4	1	8
<b>Discrimination</b>					
• Discrimination towards women as far as promotion is concerned.		1			1
• Preference is still given to white colleagues when it comes to promotion and leadership positions in projects, etc.			1		1
• There is unequal access to the research infrastructure with reference to different cultures.			1		1
• Preconceived notions and stereotyping with regard to race still occur.				1	1
• Because I am different, I am not always treated fairly.				1	1
• Since most of the information I receive is in Afrikaans, I cannot participate nor have a sense of belonging.				1	1
Total	1	2	3	3	6
<b>Gender issues</b>					
• Rules and regulations are not communicated clearly by higher authority — communication.		1			1
• I receive little feedback from higher authority.		1			1
• I do not receive any feedback regarding my work.				1	1
• I do not know what is expected of me.				1	1
• I did not receive any clear job description or guidelines.				1	1
Total	2		3		5
<b>Work uncertainty</b>					
• Since I have a contract appointment, I am uncertain about my future.		2	1		3
Total	2	1			3
<b>Change</b>					
• No provision is made for innovation and change within the structure.		2			2
Total	2				2
<b>Training and development</b>					
• Limited opportunities for growth and limited funds made available to extend subject knowledge by means of courses.		1			1
• There is no policy regarding staff development at this institution.			1		1
Total	1	1			2



**Table 1** Continued

Identified theme	Frequencies per panel of specific theme				
	Panel				
	1	2	3	4	Total
<b>Equipment and working conditions</b>					
• The physical infrastructure, including old computers, etc., limits employees in the performance of their duties.		1			1
• I do not have an office or a telephone.				1	1
	Total	1		1	2
<b>Transformation</b>					
• The university professes to be a bilingual institution, but in practice this is not the case. (Language issue)			1		1
• The processes related to restructuring and incorporations cause career dilemmas for me.			1		1
	Total		2		2
<b>Liaison</b>					
• Liaison with other institutions is limited.		1			1
	Total	1			1
<b>Entrepreneurial initiatives</b>					
• There are not enough entrepreneurial initiatives.		1			1
	Total	1			1
<b>Bureaucracy</b>					
• Bureaucratic red tape contributes to my present career dilemmas.		1			1
	Total	1			1
<b>Family obligations</b>					
• My family obligations contribute to my already high workload.		1			1
	Total	1			1
<b>Career management</b>					
• I am forced to remain an academic — I am not considered for any management posts.			1		1
	Total		1		1

in the field of lecturing before they can become involved in research and community service. Female academics must also fulfil a family role in addition to their work role.

The above findings are consistent with the research results obtained in New Zealand, the USA, Australia and South Africa (Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2004:5; Gillespie *et al.*, 2001:55). Several researchers, including Beehr (1995:64), Coetzee (1999:69), DeFrank and Ivancevich (1998:56), Fairbrother and Warn (2003:9), Monnapula-Mapesela (2002:145), and Van Daalen and Odenaal (2003:421), have indicated that role overload and role conflict have a negative impact on job satisfaction.

**Financial remuneration**

White male academics in the early career phase in particular regarded inadequate financial remuneration as the chief career dilemma they have to contend with as seven of the 10 res-

ponses came from this particular panel. The respondents indicated that, in their opinion, their remuneration packages were not market-related and or competitive. This was seemingly a smaller problem to white female and black male academics as only two and one member(s) of these particular panels, respectively, referred to their financial remuneration as problematic. No female black academics identified financial remuneration as contributing to their career dilemmas.

Anderson *et al.* (2002:84), Barkhuizen *et al.* (2004:19) and Oshagbemi (1997:356) identify financial remuneration as one of the main problems that contribute to job dissatisfaction within higher education institutions in South Africa and all over the world. According to Potgieter (2002:22), numerous black academics leave higher education institutions owing to poor financial remuneration, which did not seem to be the case in this study. Ball (2004:22) points out that poor financial remuneration of academics in South Africa is one of the main reasons why higher education institutions cannot recruit and retain academics of a high calibre. Oshagbemi and Hickson (2003:359) found that academics in South Africa are particularly unhappy about the difference in financial remuneration between academics and their counterparts in the private sector, who do not have the same academic qualifications.

According to Baruch (2004:61) and Schreuder and Coetzee (2006:280), financial remuneration is directly and indirectly related to the standard of living, sense of self-worth, job satisfaction and status of persons and their dependants. According to Mentz (1998:114) and Scheepers (1995:41), remuneration contributes instrumentally to the satisfaction of physiological and psychological needs. If there is a perception that the remuneration package is inadequate, it can have a negative impact on the morale of employees and the afore-mentioned aspects (Wiley, 1997:275).

### Support with regard to research and teaching

The lack of support with regard to research and teaching (according to Table 1) is especially of concern to black male academics as 40% of them showed concern for this. Although this was also a problem for the other panels, it was not of the same magnitude. It is evident from the results that academics at this institution needed more guidance regarding research and teaching during this phase of their careers, and that they expressed a need for a greater involvement in research under the guidance of experienced colleagues. According to Crandall and Perrewe (1995:21) and Fontana (1993:47), a lack of training and support with regard to research and teaching can give rise to uncertainty among academics in the early career phase, which can hamper performance and subsequent promotion.

### Discrimination

Discrimination was more of a career dilemma to black academics than their white counterparts as indicated by the results in Table 1. The nature of the discrimination, as indicated by the black panel members, concerned aspects such as promotion, access to the research infrastructure, stereotyping on the basis of race, fair treatment, and language. According to Slavin, Rainer, McCreary and Gowda (1991:158) and Strumpfer (1983:391), it is particularly members of a minority group within a specific population who are on the receiving end of discrimination. Compared to the white academic staff, black academics are presently still the minority group at this particular higher education institution, as they only constitute an estimated 8% of the academic staff.

### Gender issues

There was a perception by some of the white and black female participants that rules and regulations were not clearly communicated to them by management, that no feedback was given to them regarding their work performance, that they did not know what was expected from them and that there were no clear job descriptions. These findings corresponded with the research results obtained by Barkhuizen *et al.* (2004:21) which also focused on academics at South African higher education institutions.

According to Chen, Chang and Yeh (2003:195), Grutter (2000:288), Schreuder and Coetzee (2006:163), and Schreuder and Theron (2002:88-91), employees in the early career phase will have a strong need for feedback, clarity about expectations, information about policy, procedures, systems, structures, etc., to enable them to effectively adapt to the organisation and to develop. If these aspects are lacking it can result in uncertainty and job dissatisfaction, which reduces productivity.

### Recommendations and concluding remarks

In order to effectively address the career dilemmas experienced by academics in the early career phase, this particular higher education institution could consider the following action plans based on the findings of the study:

- Establishing an effective performance management system that is easy to understand and implement and is transparent, as well as equitable and fair. The promotion criteria must be spelled out clearly and applied consistently.
- Supporting new academics with teaching, research and community service by means of training opportunities, regular feedback, mentorships on the relevant aspects.
- Redesigning tasks to address the issue of role-overload.
- Providing market-related and competitive remuneration packages.

Although the above steps may be limited to this particular institution, other higher learning institutions could also consider them as they appear to be recurring themes in higher education as indicated by national and international research findings. Further studies to explore the career dilemmas of academia in the middle and late career phases should also be considered — to see whether there are any differences due to the particular career phase.

Although not part of this investigation, institutions should also consider interventions aimed at training young academics to deal more effectively with career dilemmas they identified and had control over, or to modify their appraisal of the current situation in order to deal more effectively with the particular career dilemmas. Examples of this strategy could include cognitive restructuring and coping strategies.

This study and other research findings therefore indicate once more that higher education institutions no longer provide the low stress environment they once did. It is therefore important that the career dilemmas of academics (in the early career phase) are identified and addressed, since they will continue to have an immense impact on the job satisfaction of these academics and the quality and sustainability of higher education institutions in general.

If higher education therefore wish to attract prospective academics and retain these in the early career phase, they will need to address the career dilemmas of this particular group. Failing this, higher education may well run the risk of not producing enough high calibre scholars as they once did.

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