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RESEARCH REPORT

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Teaching, research, and everything in between: An autoethnographic account of academic identity

Elda du Toit

Department of Financial Management, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence
Elda du Toit, Economic and Management Sciences Building, Room 3-12, Lynnwood Road, Hillcrest, Pretoria 0002, South Africa.
Email: elda.dutoit@up.ac.za

Abstract

This analytic autoethnography offers a critical and personal reflection on two decades (2005–2025) of academic life at a South African university. Framed within South Africa's shifting higher education landscape, the study explores academic identity formation through eight thematic lenses: from early experiences as an unprepared lecturer to the challenges and rewards of research, postgraduate supervision, pedagogic innovation, academic citizenship, and institutional service. Despite the increasing demand for excellence across teaching, research and service, the narrative reveals a persistent lack of formal preparation and mentoring for new academics, highlighting a systemic oversight in academic development. However, alongside these structural challenges, the account affirms the deeply fulfilling nature of academic work when driven by curiosity, care and purpose. Alternating between cycles of self-doubt and confidence, fatigue and renewal, the role of the lecturer-researcher emerges as both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant. By drawing on the author's lived experience, supported by theoretical frameworks on professional development, emotional labour, and transformative learning, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that rehumanises academic life. It calls for greater institutional recognition of academic work's emotional

and relational dimensions while affirming the value of narrative inquiry in understanding and sustaining academic passion.

KEYWORDS
academic citizenship, academic identity, autoethnography, emotional labour, higher education, lecturer-researcher, postgraduate supervision, professional development, South African academia, transformative learning

Context and implications

Rationale for this study: Academics are often expected to take on complex teaching, supervision, and service responsibilities with little formal preparation or mentoring. This autoethnography responds to that gap by offering a situated, two-decade account of academic identity development in South African higher education, where institutional transformation intersects with personal and professional growth.

Why the new findings matter: By tracing turning points such as imposter syndrome, doctoral failure, supervision challenges, and quiet leadership, the study highlights how identity is shaped not only by outputs but also by emotional labour, boundary-setting, and relational practices. It demonstrates that autoethnography is more than a research method; it can also serve as a developmental tool that makes visible the hidden dimensions of academic life and provides others with a lens through which to interpret their own journeys.

Implications for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers: The findings carry implications for multiple audiences. For practitioners, the narrative underscores the importance of reflection, mentorship, and boundary-setting as strategies to sustain passion and prevent burnout, showing that quiet, non-positional leadership and care work are as vital as teaching and research. For researchers, the study demonstrates how autoethnography can be used rigorously to interrogate academic identity, integrate personal and institutional dimensions, and contribute to scholarly conversations about higher education transformation. For policy makers and institutions, the account highlights the need for structured academic development that recognises emotional and service labour, values academic citizenship, and fosters inclusive cultures. Investing in reflective and supportive professional development can help universities retain and empower their staff.

INTRODUCTION

Professional development is widely recognised as a cornerstone for ensuring high-quality teaching and learning in higher education institutions (De Rijdt et al., 2013). As universities worldwide respond to shifting societal expectations, technological disruption, and policy reforms, professional development has become central in institutional strategies to enhance academic performance and student success. In today's rapidly evolving academic landscape, professional development is not only about updating subject knowledge or pedagogical techniques—it is increasingly positioned to address broader institutional and systemic

challenges, including curriculum responsiveness, inclusivity, and integrating emerging technologies (Behari-Leak, 2017).

Such initiatives are intended to align individual academic practices with organisational transformation, bridging the gap between policy imperatives and everyday academic work. Ideally, professional development should lead to lasting shifts in how educators think, act, and engage with their professional responsibilities. It should be transformative, rather than transactional, facilitating reflective practice, identity development, and enhanced institutional commitment. When implemented effectively, professional development enhances the individual's capability and the institution's collective capacity to meet strategic goals. However, this ideal is not always realised. This study demonstrates that academics are often left to navigate their roles with limited formal preparation or developmental support. In such contexts, reflective methodologies such as autoethnography can be vital in supporting professional growth, helping individuals make sense of their practice, and offering pathways to more intentional, resilient, and contextually responsive academic identities.

Traditional approaches to professional development, such as action research, are widely acknowledged for stimulating critical reflection, empowering practitioners, and improving teaching and learning practices (Kennedy, 2005; McNiff, 1995). These methods invite educators to engage systematically with their classrooms and curricula, using iterative inquiry to align theory with practice and drive evidence-based change. However, while action research focuses on pedagogical intervention and improvement, it may not always fully capture academic work's emotional, relational, and identity-based aspects that shape professional growth. Autoethnography offers a complementary and potentially transformative contribution to this domain. As a qualitative methodology grounded in narrative and critical self-reflection, autoethnography enables academics to examine their own experiences within the broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which they work (Adams et al., 2015; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). By writing and interpreting personal narratives, autoethnographers generate insights into how professional identities are formed, challenged, and negotiated over time. This method allows researchers to explore their internal responses to institutional dynamics and invites readers into these personal-professional spaces, offering a deeper, more embodied understanding of academic life.

The combination of introspection and cultural analysis uniquely positions autoethnography to reveal the often-unspoken dimensions of academic practice, including emotion, uncertainty, resistance, and renewal. In doing so, it supports individual development and collective dialogue about what it means to be an academic in changing and often challenging institutional environments. There has been increasing interest in the use of autoethnography across a wide range of disciplines, including education, health sciences, management studies, and more recently, higher education (Godber & Atkins, 2021; Higgins, 2024; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2011; Tillman, 2011; Van Amsterdam, 2014; Warren-Gordon & Jackson-Brown, 2022). Autoethnography has emerged as a valuable form of qualitative inquiry because it examines the intersection between personal experience and broader cultural, institutional, or disciplinary structures. By situating the self as both subject and researcher, autoethnography allows for a form of reflexive scholarship that foregrounds voice, positionality, and lived experience (Adams et al., 2015). In contexts such as higher education, where identity, emotion, and institutional dynamics frequently converge, autoethnography has become increasingly relevant for capturing the complexity of academic work.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Despite its growing legitimacy as a research method, autoethnography within the academic professional development domain remains relatively limited. Most academic development

programmes prioritise skill-based or procedural training, often overlooking the deeper reflective and identity-related dimensions of becoming and evolving as an academic. A small but growing body of literature has begun to address this gap, illustrating how autoethnographic methods, particularly in the form of facilitated or co-constructed narratives, can support professional learning, critical reflection, and the transformation of practice (Chang et al., 2014; Grenier & Collins, 2016; Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012; Kinchin & Cabot, 2015). These studies demonstrate that when grounded in dialogue, mentoring, or structured reflection, autoethnography can function as a developmental tool that challenges assumptions, surfaces tacit knowledge, and enhances scholarly agency.

Kempster and Iszatt-White (2012) introduced co-constructed autoethnography in the context of leadership development, using 'leadership' in a broad sense that extends beyond formal managerial roles to encompass professional agency, namely the capacity to influence, guide and shape practice and culture within one's context. In their model, a mentee first constructs a narrative of their leadership (or influence) experience, which is then critically examined in dialogue with a mentor. This iterative process of reflection facilitates deep transformation in how individuals understand and enact their professional agency. Similarly, Chang et al. (2014) report how collaborative autoethnographic engagement between mentor and mentee led to unexpected yet valuable growth in influencing others and shaping professional environments. In these approaches, the developmental outcome, whether described as leadership, agency, or influence, is enabled through relationships. Grenier and Collins (2016) propose 'facilitated autoethnography' as a method within human resource development, in which the facilitator actively guides the storyteller, prompting reflection that promotes professional insight. Likewise, Kinchin and Cabot (2015) developed 'framed autoethnography' using concept maps in interviews to structure reflective narratives, particularly in academic teaching contexts. This framing mechanism addresses one of the common criticisms of autoethnography, that it can be overly open-ended and time-consuming. In each of these examples, although the autoethnography remains centred on one individual's experience, development is catalysed through interaction with a second party, a mentor, coach, or interviewer, who supports the reflective process (Blalock & Akehi, 2017). Thus, co-constructed, collaborative, and framed autoethnography resonates with the coaching and mentoring model of professional development conceptualised by Kennedy (2005), where learning occurs through critical, relational dialogue that builds both self-awareness and the capacity to influence others.

O'Neil et al. (2016) make a compelling case for the potential of 'analytic autoethnography' as a professional development tool, particularly for academics seeking to engage critically with their own teaching, research, and institutional engagement. Unlike co-constructed or mentor-facilitated models of reflective inquiry, O'Neil argues that analytic autoethnography can be conducted independently without needing an external facilitator. This makes it both accessible and empowering for those navigating the complexities of academic identity formation within demanding institutional contexts. Drawing explicitly on Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, O'Neil demonstrates how the autoethnographic process, when grounded in systematic critical reflection, can support significant shifts in perspective and practice. According to Mezirow, learning occurs through stages that begin with a disorienting dilemma, followed by self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, exploration of new roles or actions, and eventual reintegration of the transformed perspective into one's professional identity. These stages effectively map onto the process of writing and interpreting one's narrative through autoethnography. For academics, such dilemmas may arise through failed research, challenging supervision cases, shifting institutional mandates, or personal-professional tensions, all of which compel re-evaluation of beliefs, methods, and values.

Importantly, O'Neil also emphasises that autoethnography enables the integration of personal experience with institutional culture, positioning the self as both a product of and a participant in organisational transformation. This capacity to locate individual narrative within

systemic structures makes autoethnography uniquely suited to professional development in higher education. Furthermore, creative analytic practices—such as metaphor, emotion, and introspection—highlight that scholarly reflection is not solely cognitive but also affective, embodied and imaginative. In this way, autoethnography becomes not just a method of inquiry but a pedagogic and developmental strategy for cultivating deeper awareness, resilience and renewal in academic practice.

This autoethnography is situated within the unique socio-historical context of South African higher education, an evolving system shaped by post-apartheid transformation, widening access, and growing emphasis on internationalisation and decolonisation. My academic journey unfolds within this dynamic space, marked by institutional pressures to improve research productivity, transform curricula, and enhance diversity and inclusion. These national imperatives inevitably intersect with personal identity, institutional roles, and scholarly priorities. This analytic autoethnography thus critically explores the often-overlooked complexities of academic life through personal reflection on my career as a lecturer and researcher at a South African university since January 2005. The impetus for this study arises from a persistent problem in higher education: while academics are increasingly expected to excel in teaching, research and service, they are seldom adequately prepared for the multifaceted demands of the role. This lack of preparation is compounded by institutional expectations, shifting pedagogical practices, and the emotional and intellectual labour that underpin academic work, particularly in the context of South African higher education.

This study joins a growing body of autoethnographic work that positions academic identity as a site of personal, cultural and institutional negotiation (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Halliwell & Limpus, 2025) and aims to illuminate how academic identity is formed, challenged and reshaped over time. Drawing from my lived experience, the study offers a situated account of navigating teaching, postgraduate supervision, pedagogic innovation, curriculum transformation, and academic citizenship, all while engaging in knowledge production in financial management. Academic citizenship refers to academics' responsibilities and contributions beyond their core teaching and research duties, including service to the department, faculty, university, and broader scholarly community (Macfarlane, 2007). It encompasses roles such as serving on committees, mentoring colleagues, contributing to curriculum development, participating in governance structures, and fostering inclusive academic cultures. This form of engagement, though often under-recognised in performance metrics, is critical to the functioning and ethos of higher education institutions. Academic citizenship sustains collegial governance, integrates teaching and research with institutional values, and promotes a sense of shared responsibility for academic and institutional success.

This research uses autoethnography to highlight the internal negotiations and external pressures that shape academic trajectories. It responds to calls for more reflexive, contextually grounded scholarship that recognises academic life's emotional, relational and ethical dimensions. Positioned within broader discourses on higher education transformation, internationalisation, and research productivity, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and rewards of academic work in contemporary South Africa. This work also resonates with broader calls for insurgent, grounded scholarship that confronts institutional narratives and reclaims academic identity from the margins (Kumsa, 2021). Like Kumsa, I seek to make the quiet negotiations and emotional labour of constructing an academic home within a transforming institution visible.

THEORY AND CONTEXT

Professional development encompasses structured efforts to enhance professionals' knowledge, skills, and conceptual understanding within their occupational settings (De Rijdt

et al., 2013). While definitions vary, two common characteristics remain, namely that it targets adult learners and aims to effect positive changes in beliefs, behaviours, knowledge, and capabilities (Lauer et al., 2014). To be genuinely effective, professional development should move beyond skill acquisition and foster capacity-building through critical reflection, participatory engagement, and transformative learning approaches (Mulà et al., 2017).

Among the various adult learning theories applied to academic professional development, transformative learning has gained particular traction due to its emphasis on internal change prompted by critical reflection, disorienting experiences, and dialogical engagement. Rooted in a tradition that values reflective inquiry, transformative learning theory synthesises the insights of educational thinkers such as Dewey (1933), who advocated for reflection as a cornerstone of experiential learning; Habermas (1971), who introduced the concept of communicative rationality as a foundation for emancipatory knowledge; and Schön (1983), who conceptualised the 'reflective practitioner' as someone capable of learning through action and introspection. Moon (1999) later extended this work by formalising structured reflection as a core element of professional formation, particularly relevant for higher education practitioners navigating dynamic and often ambiguous roles. Building on these foundations, Mezirow (1991) articulated a comprehensive framework for transformative learning, identifying critical reflection and active dialogue as the mechanisms through which individuals reassess their underlying assumptions, habitual expectations, and core self-concepts. In this context, transformation is not simply about acquiring new knowledge but about reconstituting the lens through which one understands knowledge, practice and identity. As Becker (2017) and Boyd (2008) suggest, such learning is cognitive and emotional, often initiated by discomfort or crisis and resolved through deep introspection and relational engagement. This emphasis on internal transformation provides a particularly strong conceptual rationale for using autoethnography in academic development. By facilitating sustained reflection and narrative inquiry, autoethnography becomes a mechanism for educators to surface, confront, and ultimately reconfigure the perspectives that shape their practice.

Mezirow's model outlines a 10-phase process, beginning with a disorienting dilemma—an event or realisation that unsettles previously held beliefs (Mezirow, 2000). This triggers a reflective reassessment of one's values and practices, often accompanied by discomfort or emotional dissonance such as guilt, shame or regret (Boyd, 2008). As O'Neil et al. (2016) illustrate in an autoethnographic account of postgraduate supervision, such emotional realisations are integral to recognising one's limitations and motivating change. The process continues with exploring alternative roles and perspectives, acquiring new competencies, and gradually integrating revised understandings into one's professional identity and actions. Importantly, this sequence does not need to be linear; it is iterative and adaptive, varying according to individual and context (Hoggan, 2016). Layered and reflexive autoethnographies have demonstrated the method's capacity to reveal how academic identities are constructed and reconstructed over time and across shifting institutional contexts (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Yan & Poole, 2024).

While traditional professional development models often rely on external facilitation or group-based interventions, autoethnography offers a deeply personal and context-sensitive alternative, whether facilitated or self-directed. Its transformative potential is grounded in sustained, critical engagement with one's own practice, supported by theoretical frameworks and, where applicable, co-constructive dialogue. As such, it deserves greater recognition within the repertoire of methodologies available for academic professional growth.

Autoethnography as a methodology enables the integration of personal narrative with cultural, institutional, and professional analysis. Positioned at the intersection of autobiography and ethnography, it allows the researcher to simultaneously inhabit the roles of both participant and observer, making it particularly effective for examining the complexities of academic life, as Ellis et al. (2011) explain, autoethnography foregrounds experience not

as anecdotal or incidental, but as a legitimate and analytically rich source of knowledge. The method offers a powerful lens to uncover academic labour's often-unspoken and affective dimensions, including identity development, emotional labour, vulnerability and motivation. Unlike more traditional forms of inquiry prioritising detachment and objectivity, autoethnography embraces introspection and positionality as epistemological strengths. It allows for a close examination of how individual experience is shaped by, and contributes to, larger cultural and institutional contexts. As a qualitative and critically reflexive method, the researcher-participant must apply scholarly rigour to personal experience, tracing patterns, tensions and meaning through both memory and real-time observation. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the academic profession from within. It illuminates how personal growth, professional expectations, and institutional culture intertwine in the daily life of a lecturer-researcher. It produces knowledge about the self and generates insights with broader relevance to academic practice, development and transformation.

The data informing this analytic autoethnography consists of teaching portfolios, supervision records, an academic CV, published articles, and a self-interview. An interview schedule was prepared for a self-interview process. The themes are woven into a coherent narrative, highlighting key personal experiences emerging over two decades (2005–2025) of academic practice. The methodological stance is interpretivist, recognising that meaning is constructed through interaction with institutional structures, students, and academic communities.

DATA ANALYSIS

This analytic autoethnography draws on various artefacts spanning two decades of academic practice, including teaching portfolios, supervision records, an academic CV, published articles, and a structured self-interview. These materials were selected to represent both the formal outputs and the often-overlooked informal labour of academic life, offering a longitudinal and multi-dimensional perspective on professional development. Rather than being subjected to a traditional documentary analysis, the artefacts functioned as memory prompts and contextual anchors during the self-interview and narrative construction. They provided chronological reference points, verified timelines, and assisted in recalling key events, milestones, and shifts in practice. In this way, they ensured that the thematic reflections were grounded in verifiable moments from my career, even though the artefacts themselves are not directly reproduced in the findings.

The self-interview was central to this study's introspective inquiry. It was designed using a semi-structured schedule comprising eight thematic domains: academic identity, mentorship, emotional labour, teaching philosophy, scholarly contributions, institutional engagement, professional growth, and leadership. Each theme included a set of open-ended questions (typically five to seven per theme) that prompted reflection on critical incidents, turning points, and affective experiences. These questions were developed by drawing on relevant literature (e.g. Adams et al., 2015; Anderson, 2006; O'Neil, 2016) and tailored to align with the evolving narrative structure of the study.

The self-interview process was conducted over several weeks, with responses written in extended narrative form. Rather than completing the questions in a single sitting, I returned to each thematic cluster multiple times, allowing space for reflection, memory recall, and the surfacing of latent insights. This recursive engagement enhanced the depth of the data and mirrored the iterative sense-making that characterises analytic autoethnography. Yan (2021) illustrates in his autoethnographic study of a non-native immigrant teacher that the self-interview can act as both a reflective mirror and a methodological tool, supporting critical

self-inquiry and professional development. Similarly, in this study, the self-interview served as a data source and an instrument for reflexive analysis.

The resulting narratives were treated as first-person experiential accounts. These were analysed alongside institutional artefacts through a reflexive, iterative process. Initial rounds of open coding focused on identifying salient moments, recurring tensions, and emotionally resonant experiences. Codes ranged from the descriptive (e.g. 'promotion milestones', 'emotional burden', 'gendered expectations') to the interpretive (e.g. 'identity transformation', 'institutional loyalty vs. disillusionment').

Subsequently, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabled the grouping of codes into broader thematic clusters. While some themes aligned directly with the original interview domains, others—such as 'quiet leadership', 'academic citizenship', and 'boundary-setting for well-being'—emerged inductively. These themes were further interrogated using theoretical frameworks such as Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, Hochschild's (1983) emotional labour, and Whitchurch's (2008) notion of the academic third space. This ensured personal insights were located within wider scholarly conversations about academic identity, institutional culture, and professional development.

To support reflexivity, analytic memoing and journaling accompany each analysis stage. These records captured evolving positionalities, interpretive dilemmas, and emergent insights, ensuring the analytic process remained interrogative rather than merely descriptive. As Sparkes (2024) cautions, autoethnography traverses ethically contested terrain where self-exposure, relational accountability, and institutional visibility must be carefully negotiated. In this study, I continuously revisited these ethical boundaries during data interpretation and narrative construction to ensure that personal disclosures did not indirectly compromise the integrity or dignity of others mentioned.

The analysis culminated in a critical narrative synthesis that integrated emergent themes with existing literature to illuminate academic life's personal, relational, and institutional dimensions. Through this approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how academics—particularly in contexts marked by limited formal preparation—navigate their identities, negotiate institutional demands, and derive meaning from their work. As with other reflexive autoethnographies (e.g. Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Yan & Poole, 2024), the analytic process employed here involved layering experiential data with artefacts and theoretical interpretation, creating a multi-dimensional portrait of academic life.

THEMATIC REFLECTIONS

Becoming a lecturer

My transition into full-time academia in 2005 was marked by apprehension despite my previous experience as a contract lecturer in Financial Accounting. '*My first encounter with lecturing was met with trepidation*'.[1] The shift was stark—not only was I now responsible for third-year Financial Management students, but I was also teaching unfamiliar content. Many students were close to my age, adding to the discomfort of establishing authority in the classroom.

Although I had some teaching experience, the expectations of a permanent academic position were significantly different. '*Research was suddenly also a KPI*,' which was not considered in my contract-based role. Moreover, course preparation—once largely determined by an experienced course coordinator—was now my responsibility. I found myself navigating new territory, working to discover and develop my own '*teaching voice*.'

This transition involved a profound identity shift. No longer a student or junior academic, I was now perceived as the authority in the classroom. '*Older students were now looking at*

me as the most knowledgeable person in the room, even though I found I was learning as much as they were.' This performance of certainty—'*putting up my mask*'—gradually gave way to a more authentic sense of confidence, nurtured by growing recognition of my impact on students' learning and well-being. This reflects the identity tensions reported by Halliwell and Limpus (2025), who note that early academic roles often demand a performance of confidence while internal uncertainty remains unresolved. It also aligns with Whitworth's (2023) depiction of emerging academics seeking a 'front porch' of belonging in a world where certainty is often performed.

Teaching large, diverse cohorts posed its own set of challenges. Maintaining discipline and keeping students engaged was initially difficult, especially with students '*almost my own age*.' Before the era of mobile technology, distraction was limited, yet keeping attention remained demanding. Nonetheless, I was struck by '*how well the students engaged with me and their classmates*,' especially given their varied academic and demographic backgrounds.

Some classroom experiences left a lasting impression. When my authority was challenged, I responded directly: '*I had to sit them down and firmly tell them that I have the degree they are still studying for… and that they should listen to what I said*.' This moment, while unsettling, also marked a turning point in my development as a confident educator. In contrast, I recall a more difficult day: '*The class simply would not settle down. I packed my stuff and left the classroom. That was a low point for me, but it never happened again*.'

It soon became clear that subject expertise alone was not sufficient. Students arrived with various emotional and academic needs that directly influenced their learning. In South Africa, where cultural norms still influence gendered expectations, especially in traditional academic disciplines like finance, I often found myself quietly observing the assumption that women should take on more emotional or service work. These expectations are not always visible but are deeply embedded in the day-to-day practices of higher education institutions. With limited student support structures as opposed to the assistance available now, I found myself relying on my own experience and trying to assist as much as possible. In many cases, '*we become students' pseudo parents*,' particularly for those studying far from home. This unspoken pastoral role added emotional weight to the teaching experience.

Regarding pedagogy, I relied initially on the learning strategies that had worked for me, using textbooks and lecture notes to unpack material in a way that felt accessible and logical. While the intellectual preparation for lectures could be supported through reading and consultation, the emotional and interpersonal aspects of teaching remained taxing.

Navigating the academic environment as one of the youngest staff members brought its own form of pressure. Many of my colleagues had even been my own lecturers. '*In the beginning, it was intimidating… I was not confident at all*.' However, the environment proved encouraging. '*My colleagues never made me feel undervalued but instead encouraged me to give my opinion*,' allowing me to grow into my role and contribute meaningfully to academic discussions.

Looking back on those formative years, the most significant lessons were pedagogical. '*Lecturers are very much thrown into the deep end and need to learn as they go on*.' With no formal training in teaching, I had to develop my skills experientially. Research was still new, having completed only a mini-dissertation for my master's degree. However, a supportive colleague invited me to co-author a research article published in 2007 and it became '*the most-cited paper on my record*'—a fortuitous and affirming beginning to my research career.

Ultimately, I developed my teaching style independently, shaped by ongoing student interactions and refined through trial and error. Reflecting on my younger self, I gently reminded myself, '*Do not be so hard on yourself. Practice makes perfect… Learning from mistakes is not something to be ashamed of, but part of personal growth*.'

Over and above my personal development as a lecturer, I entered academia during a time of national restructuring. I witnessed firsthand how South African higher education grappled with the imperative to transform from a historically exclusive system into one that prioritises equity, inclusivity, and social justice. These shifts were complex and, at times, contested, particularly as institutional notions of excellence and relevance were redefined. One significant moment of change during my tenure was the transition from a dual-medium (Afrikaans and English) language policy to English-only instruction. This shift, while aligned with broader goals of accessibility and inclusivity, also brought personal and institutional tensions to the surface, as it challenged long-standing identities and traditions. Kumsa (2021) reminds us that building an academic identity in the face of structural change requires both resistance and imagination. These emotional dimensions of navigating transformation are often under-acknowledged in conventional academic development discourses.

While the University of Pretoria has made significant progress in addressing historical inequalities, the pace and nature of transformation have sometimes felt more incremental compared to institutions in more demographically diverse urban centres such as Johannesburg or Cape Town. These universities often reflect more multicultural staff and student bodies and have been at the forefront of activist-driven change. In contrast, working in Pretoria meant navigating transformation in a context where cultural homogeneity and historical privilege were more deeply entrenched. This distinction shaped the institutional climate and my awareness of what inclusivity and identity work required in such an environment.

My own professional identity has been shaped alongside these evolving priorities, as I navigated what it meant to be an academic within a transforming institution in a transforming country.

The researcher emerges

My research journey was not driven by a singular passion but by personal ambition and professional necessity. '*It was simply the next step after doing a master's degree*', noting that promotion within academia required a doctorate. Having completed both a coursework master's degree in Financial Management and a postgraduate diploma in Investigative and Forensic Accounting, I aimed to integrate these two interests through my doctoral research. The topic I chose focused on whether financial statement fraud could be detected from publicly available financial data—an intersection of theory and application that appealed to my academic and professional sensibilities.

Personally, completing a PhD was a goal I wanted to achieve for its own sake. Professionally, I was still learning what it meant to be a scholar. The doctoral process became both a personal transformation and a test of endurance. '*A PhD is not necessarily difficult; it is rather a matter of endurance, as it is such a big project and undertaking*.' My understanding of research evolved significantly during this period. Yan and Poole (2024) similarly describe the doctoral journey as a layered identity development process, marked by moments of self-doubt, scholarly negotiation, and eventual transformation. Having completed only a mini-dissertation for my master's degree, I entered doctoral work with limited experience in scholarly inquiry. '*Research to contribute to the scholarly conversation is completely different*'. Only through doctoral-level research—and later through publishing—did I feel I was truly contributing to my field. '*Especially when you start to get cited and realise that what you said was worthwhile for other scholars to include in their own work*.'

However, the path was far from linear. My first attempt at the PhD failed. Despite the support of a well-meaning but inexperienced supervisor, the external examiners were not satisfied. '*They sent the work back, requesting major revisions… and my doctorate was denied after resubmission*.' I received this news while volunteering as a financial manager

in Malaysian Borneo on a project with Raleigh International. The setback was severe. After a year abroad, '*I immersed myself back into my teaching responsibilities, unsure whether I even wanted to continue pursuing a doctorate*.' Eventually, with encouragement from a colleague and under new supervision, I returned to the project with renewed determination. '*Failing at my first attempt nearly broke me… but a year away from academia gave me a fresh perspective*.' The revised thesis was resubmitted and successfully passed by a new set of examiners. Excluding the year abroad, the doctoral journey took six years. It was a difficult but formative experience. '*It taught me much resilience and the value of hard work*.' Like Rampersaud-Skorka (2023), I experienced my doctoral journey as a layered identity negotiation and resilience process.

Interestingly, while my teaching experience did not initially inform my doctoral research, the situation changed. Teaching honours research methodology and supervising master's students later contributed significantly to my own understanding of research. '*There is nothing like teaching something to students that helps you understand and master the concepts yourself*.' Halliwell and Limpus (2025) echo this reciprocal nature of learning, arguing that academic growth often arises from dialogical encounters with students and colleagues rather than from structured training alone.

Completing my doctorate was transformative, but not in the immediate or expected ways. '*I did not feel different after my doctorate. People consider one differently, but I sometimes feel as inexperienced as I was initially*.' The academic journey is a continuous learning process, and I still feel challenged with each new research project. I also recognised the solitude of research. While I enjoy working independently, co-authorship sometimes comes with the pressure of perceived expertise. '*There is an expectation that 'you know what you are doing' since you have a doctorate*,' which could be daunting, especially when mentoring younger colleagues.

My doctoral work laid the foundation for my ongoing research interests. '*Analysing financial statements and obtaining respondent feedback for my doctorate showed me the value of corporate reporting*.' This interest led to further corporate disclosure, risk, and sustainability work. While the core interest remained, the context evolved as '*[t]he uptake of integrated reporting significantly changed the landscape… and new standards such as IFRS S1 and S2 as well as King V continue to create new research opportunities*.' IFRS S1 and S2 are global sustainability disclosure standards issued by the International Sustainability Standards Board, which South Africa has committed to adopt, making them directly relevant for local reporting practices. King V, meanwhile, is the latest South African corporate governance code that emphasises ethical leadership, integrated thinking, and sustainable value creation.

Reflecting on what research means, I describe it as a complex relationship. '*I have a love-hate relationship with research*,' particularly with publishing. Rejection can be disheartening, especially when one has invested deeply in a project. I admit that competition and comparison can be unhealthy, yet difficult to avoid. Patience with a long publication process remains challenging: '*It has happened three times now that I have canned a project only to take it up years later and then successfully publish it*.'

Nonetheless, research remains central to my academic identity. '*I am a researcher; intellectually, I appreciate how it challenges me; and professionally, I value how it has contributed to my promotion and NRF* [South African National Research Foundation] *rating*.' As for the transformation the doctoral journey brings, I see it not as a completed phase but as an ongoing state. '*Being a researcher means being in a constant phase of transformation. If one becomes stagnant, that is where the research journey ends*.'

Supervising futures

My first experience supervising a master's student was both daunting and formative. The student was pursuing a full dissertation—something I had not done myself, nor supervised before. '*I had no idea what I was doing and felt very much out of my depth*.' With no formal training in supervision, I fell back on the only model I had, my own experience as a student. I emulated what I had appreciated from my master's supervisor and consciously avoided what I had found unhelpful. Fortunately, the student was self-motivated and later completed a PhD, making my early uncertainty more manageable. Still, I viewed the responsibility with apprehension: '*I was scared*,' I must admit. '*It was also not a topic I was very comfortable with*.'

Without access to tools like ChatGPT or other artificial intelligence resources, I relied solely on my judgement and learning-by-doing approach. In hindsight, access to tools like ChatGPT or other AI-assisted resources could have eased some of the discomfort I experienced as a novice supervisor. These tools are not substitutes for academic mentorship but can offer structured, immediate support to students and supervisors when grappling with unfamiliar or complex topics. AI can help students break down difficult questions, stimulate idea generation, and clarify academic concepts, often functioning as a non-judgmental first port of call before seeking human guidance. For me, as a supervisor, AI-enabled resources have increasingly served as thought partners in developing clearer explanations and examples when responding to students' queries. They help to test whether my guidance is sufficiently precise or accessible, and in this way, they support rather than supplant the core responsibilities of academic supervision. Used critically and ethically, such tools can enhance pedagogical responsiveness and build confidence, particularly when navigating new research terrain or working with students with diverse learning needs.

Over time, my approach to supervision has evolved significantly. As my own research knowledge deepened and I became more confident in my field, I grew more comfortable guiding students, especially those working within my areas of expertise. I also became more structured and assertive. '*I have become far stricter, giving my students strict deadlines and requesting that they check in with me regularly*.' Attending a comprehensive and intensive supervision course further helped refine my methods and boosted my confidence as a mentor.

One of the most effective developments was the opportunity to redesign and coordinate the master's research proposal module. This allowed me to build a comprehensive, scaffolded experience for students, introducing them to the full research process. Beyond formal teaching, I prioritise availability and steady feedback. '*My policy of requesting frequent check-ins means that students send me little bits of work at a time so that I can continuously ensure they are on the right track*.' I strive to provide academic guidance and emotional reassurance, recognising that '*research, especially for the inexperienced, can be a very uncomfortable undertaking*.' I also acknowledge that students differ significantly: for some, minimal feedback suffices; for others, '*you may have to help rewrite sentences so that the work makes sense*.'

My students' most common challenge is time management, particularly as many pursue their degrees while working full-time. '*Lack of time is the most likely reason students cancel their studies*.' When motivation or confidence falters, I draw on the stories of past students who faced similar difficulties and prevailed. I also adjust my level of support accordingly. '*I can sense when more guidance is needed… to ensure they feel properly guided and not alone*.' As in teaching, supervision often involves being '*a mentor, parent, emotional support structure*.'

Although supervision is often framed as a one-directional process, students can and do challenge my thinking. One example was when I co-supervised a study in behavioural

finance, an area well outside my methodological comfort zone. '*I had to read a lot to keep up and give proper guidance*.' While supervision has not fundamentally shifted my research interests—'*we work in relatively narrow research focus areas*'—it does keep me updated with emerging literature in my field.

The emotional labour of supervision is significant. '*It can be an emotional job at times*,' especially when students face personal hardships. While I do my best to offer support, I also maintain firm boundaries to protect my own well-being. '*I will only answer emails during business hours… students are my job and should not consume my entire life*.' I avoid overly personal engagement, refraining from sharing contact details or social media access. '*This is not everyone's approach, but I prefer some distance to keep me sane*.' Adams et al. (2023) argue that being an academic also resides in the body, in sensations of exhaustion, hesitation or purpose. My role as supervisor is not just pedagogical but also somatic; I experience students' struggles viscerally, and these affective responses shape how I show up in these supervisory relationships.

Amid the challenges, the rewards are profound. '*Seeing my students walk [across] the stage at graduation ceremonies will always be my favourite*.' These moments of shared pride, reinforced when students return to acknowledge my role in their journey, bring lasting fulfilment. I also find validation in completion rates and external examiner feedback.

My philosophy of supervision has shifted from a teaching-oriented model to one focused on mentorship. '*In the beginning, I even caught myself editing students' work*'. Now, I focus on guiding rather than doing, balancing strictness with compassion. I have learned that students can easily lose momentum to other competing responsibilities without structure and accountability.

Teaching innovation, the evolving classroom

My approach to teaching has always been shaped by a desire to make learning more accessible for my students. The drive to innovate stemmed from both practical necessity and pedagogical responsiveness. '*Mostly to make life easier for myself and students*', but also to remain relevant in a constantly changing academic environment. One of my earliest innovations was the implementation of pre-recorded lectures for honours research students, who often struggled to keep up with live delivery. '*They appreciate the ability to go back and listen to some lectures again if needed*.' This approach was later extended to the master's cohort, many of whom had no prior research exposure, to help them develop well-informed proposals.

Advancements in technology have played a central role in reshaping my pedagogy. I incorporate YouTube videos, support the careful use of tools like ChatGPT, and use our university learning management system extensively to engage students more effectively. '*We need to embrace technology to make it work for us instead of against us*', recognising that today's students learn differently from earlier generations. I encourage students to use artificial intelligence tools to enhance their learning, from finding answers to difficult questions to idea generation.

I designed modules integrating case-based and research-led learning to strengthen students' research exposure. This method exposes students to academic literature and real-world examples in a structured, supportive environment. In my master's module on Strategic Management Accounting, students begin with academic article reviews, move to a fictional but realistic case study, and end with a literature-based essay. '*By the time the students finish the module, they are far more comfortable reading academic material, using it appropriately, and citing and referencing correctly*.'

Honours students, in particular, face steep challenges regarding research and academic writing. '*They are entirely inexperienced and literally do not know where to start*.' I respond by setting clear deadlines for deliverables and providing detailed feedback on each submission. I also offer regular email consultations and structured office hours to ensure students receive practical support and encouragement. '*In email and face-to-face consultations, it is often more important to be encouraging… than simply just answering their questions*.'

When the COVID-19 pandemic required a sudden pivot to online teaching, I was fortunate to have already transitioned much of my content online. '*My lectures were already available online… so I was able to hit the ground running*.' Online consultations via email proved to be an efficient support mode, allowing me to respond thoughtfully and for students to articulate more specific questions. These strategies have now become permanent elements of my teaching.

Maintaining postgraduate student engagement requires careful planning. I have found that strict deadlines are essential, particularly as many students juggle academic work with full-time jobs and family responsibilities. '*Without deadlines, they may get lost*.' Regular announcements, discussion forums, and structured participation marks help to create a sense of community, even in asynchronous or remote environments. Honours students are easier to manage due to their campus presence, while master's students, often based across the country or beyond, require more consistent digital communication.

The balance between structure and flexibility is central to my pedagogical approach. '*I aim to provide a clear structure through timelines, assessment rubrics, and guidance materials… but I remain flexible—adjusting supervision styles, refining project scopes, or accommodating different learning speeds*.' While honours and master's coursework students are generally assigned topics due to their limited research experience, I ensure they are supported in adapting these to their interests and capabilities.

Innovation in teaching is also about self-discovery. '*I learned I am a better one-on-one teacher than in a big class setting*.' Smaller settings allow for more meaningful engagement, making assessing understanding easier and offering personalised support.

Looking ahead, I am particularly interested in exploring the educational potential of AI. '*It helps me refine my assignments, set up rubrics, and formulate good answers to student email queries*.' However, I also recognise the need to teach students how to use AI responsibly. '*AI can be such a valuable tool, but some students will always be tempted to let AI generate material they can pass off as their own*.' As technology evolves, so must our methods. '*We are teaching a whole new generation of students… If we keep teaching them the same, they will not be able to adapt to a world of constant change*.'

Ultimately, teaching innovation for me is not just about tools or techniques—it is about creating learning environments that promote independence, foster engagement, and respond to the realities of modern higher education. It is a continuous process of learning, adapting, and staying curious—both for my students and myself.

Academic citizenship: Service, leadership, and impact

My understanding of academic citizenship deepened as I moved beyond the more visible academic functions of teaching, supervision and research. Initially, I viewed committee work and programme coordination as administrative obligations, peripheral to my core responsibilities. However, my perspective shifted as I saw how these roles actively shape academic culture, improve quality, and enhance the student experience. '*I began to recognise academic citizenship as an integral part of my role when I became more involved in departmental activities other than teaching, supervision and research*.'

Over time, my involvement expanded from departmental administrative duties to broader faculty and institutional leadership. This progression enhanced my ability to think institutionally, balancing the demands of governance with academic values. In particular, participating in other universities' postgraduate reviews and quality assurance processes provided deep insights into the importance of transparency, supervision consistency, and student support. '*These roles helped me grow as an academic leader, with a clearer understanding of quality assurance, governance, and the need for collegiality in advancing shared goals*.'

I have always felt that my voice was heard within these spaces, even if I speak less frequently than others. '*I am not one to easily speak, rather thinking properly [about] my question or opinion… However, I have always felt heard where my inputs were required*.'

My participation in institutional governance extends across both faculty and university levels. Within the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, I serve on key committees, including the Faculty Board, the Teaching and Learning Committee, and the Postgraduate Committee, affording me a comprehensive understanding of academic operations and policy implementation at the faculty level. At the broader institutional level, I contribute as a trustee of the university's pension fund—where strategic financial decisions affecting long-term staff welfare are made—and as a member of the Senior Appointments Committee, which plays a pivotal role in shaping academic leadership. These governance roles have deepened my insight into higher education institutions' structural, procedural, and value-oriented dimensions. Importantly, they have enabled me to observe and influence the gradual and deliberate articulation of institutional priorities and cultural shifts over time. '*I began to view these roles not as peripheral, but as a core expression of academic responsibility and stewardship*.' As Adams and Herrmann (2021) note, the performance of academic citizenship involves navigating a web of often invisible labour that sustains the academy, a dynamic especially pronounced in contexts of transition and reform.

The Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences is the first university faculty (i.e. not a business school) accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). As coordinator of the faculty's AACSB Assurance of Learning (AoL) process, I offer another important avenue for institutional impact. While the technical aspects of AoL can be demanding, the process has revealed the importance of intentional graduate outcomes and continuous improvement. '*Being accredited with AACSB has helped the entire faculty realise the importance of sending quality graduates into the world with a certain skill set*.' Balancing the administrative with the strategic has required thoughtful simplification: '*My strategy… is to make assurance of learning less tedious [for] staff so I am getting better buy-in from them*.'

However, institutional work is not without resistance. Whether in AoL implementation or changes to the master's programme I coordinate, I have encountered pushback. '*People can be quite resistant to change… When we want to change how they are used to doing things, we get met with resistance*.' Despite this, I have learned to draw motivation from purpose. '*If I believe a change is necessary and will make things easier or better for staff and students, I do not struggle to remain motivated but will push for it*.'

This philosophy extended to my involvement in the university's curriculum transformation task team. While my role was largely to gather information across faculties, the dialogues were complex. '*People have different views on what curriculum transformation is. Many think it is only important to 'Africanise' our content in the African context. However, it is far more than that*.' Encouragingly, the group I worked with was '*open-minded… and able to confirm differing views and embrace them*.'

Though I do not naturally gravitate toward formal leadership positions, I recognise that leadership–understood here as the capacity to influence, guide, and shape academic culture–is not always positional. This conception aligns with the broader view of leadership as

professional agency described earlier concerning Kempster and Iszatt-White's (2012) work, where influence is exercised through reflective practice, relational engagement, and collaborative problem-solving. Coordinating the master's programme, aligning multiple supervisors, has shown me that leadership can be collaborative and facilitative. '*I focus on creating clarity, building trust, and ensuring that academic standards are upheld… I see myself as someone who leads by supporting others*.' Over time, I have embraced a style that values consistency, fairness, and enabling others to succeed.

This quiet but persistent leadership also contributes to institutional culture. In their public letter, Yan and Poole (2024) describe alternative ways of contributing to and shaping academic cultures, particularly through listening and empathy, that are often undervalued but central to fostering inclusivity. I interpret these 'quiet' or non-positional leadership practices as being enacted through the consistent modelling of academic values and relational engagement. This understanding aligns with the broader conception of leadership as professional agency outlined earlier in this study. '*It is not always about dramatic change, but about consistently modelling fairness, inclusion, and academic integrity in daily work*.' At the university, institutional change is often incremental, but I have witnessed a gradual transformation. '*The institutional 'wheel' may turn slowly, but it does turn*.' Halliwell and Limpus (2025) similarly document how institutional change in higher education often occurs through micro-level shifts in identity and relationships, even when broader structural reforms are slow to materialise. The growing diversity in staff appointments is one such example, an encouraging change toward a more inclusive academic community. While not always visible, my contribution is part of the collective effort toward a more responsive institutional culture.

Service and leadership roles have also shaped my development as a scholar and educator. Leading academic programmes, participating in curriculum reviews, and engaging in quality assurance processes have helped me see how individual practices fit into broader institutional goals. '*These roles have made me more reflective, structured, and attuned to the evolving needs of students and the academic community*.' They have also sharpened my strategic thinking, broadened my perspective on academic standards, and improved how I guide postgraduate research.

To newer academics, I would say they must not dismiss academic citizenship. '*See it not as a distraction from teaching and research but as an essential part of shaping the academic environment you want to be part of*.' These roles may seem secondary, but create space for influence, relationship-building, and institutional visibility. '*Start small… take on a coordination task where you can make a practical difference*.' Above all, remember that sustained service helps build a reputation—'*even if people do not know you, they should know of you*.'

Scholarly contributions: Two decades of publishing

My journey into academic publishing began with a sense of uncertainty. '*I had no idea what I was doing*' when I started with my first research article. As a junior collaborator, I followed the guidance of a senior colleague, contributing primarily to the literature review while he led the analysis and interpretation. Although unfamiliar, this experience laid the foundation for a sustained and evolving scholarly trajectory.

South African universities operate under a national funding system that rewards publication in accredited journals. This reality shaped my early focus on ensuring my research met those accreditation benchmarks, not just for personal promotion but as part of institutional survival strategies within a performance-based funding model. My initial motivation to publish was driven less by passion than by these institutional expectations. '*I am a rule-follower; when I was told it is a KPI and something an academic has to do, I took it on as an unnegotiable part of my job*.' While others may have resisted these demands, I embraced

them as part of my academic responsibility. Even now, I often question whether I am '*doing it well*,' but I continue to publish, valuing both the professional validation and the contribution to knowledge.

Over time, my research interests have become more refined and theoretically grounded. While the seed was planted during my mini-dissertation, which explored the usefulness of corporate reporting, my later work delved into more nuanced aspects such as tone, readability, and stakeholder perceptions. '*I do feel better equipped now to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to the body of knowledge*.' Although institutional pressures for accredited publications and departmental subsidies shaped some choices, I was fortunate to pursue topics aligned with personal interest and institutional relevance.

Sustaining publication output has not been without its challenges. Finding ideas, securing international collaborators, and overcoming writer's block remain ongoing struggles. However, wide reading and reflective engagement with the literature often help reinvigorate my thinking. My writing process is structured but organic: '*I start with my article template and 'info dump' into the relevant areas… then collect data, do the analyses, and write up the results*.' I enjoy this empirical phase the most, '*to see what the data says*.' While I typically choose a journal after the article is drafted, I now recognise the value of targeting the journal earlier. '*Just goes to show that 20 years down the line, I still have lessons to learn*.'

Collaboration has been an enriching part of my research journey. Co-authoring has allowed me to incorporate diverse perspectives, strengthen methodological approaches, and share the workload. The most meaningful collaborations have been with students and younger colleagues. '*Just to see the excitement of them seeing their work in print is all the reward I need*.'

My most significant academic career milestone was receiving my National Research Foundation (NRF) rating in 2023. Personally, it affirmed the value of perseverance and discipline. Professionally, my work has made a legitimate contribution to the scholarly community. Of all my publications, two stand out: my first paper—highly cited and foundational—and a sole-authored article on the readability of integrated reports. '*It is being cited widely, giving me recognition for my research*.'

Although appointed in the Department of Financial Management, my research has increasingly aligned with the accounting domain. I have never been afraid to question dominant narratives. '*Even though most laud integrated reporting, I am not afraid to criticise it*.' My work highlights corporate reporting practices' shortcomings to contribute to meaningful reform.

This focus aligns with the university's strategic goal of producing impactful, socially relevant research, particularly in Africa. By investigating themes such as sustainability, risk disclosure, and corporate communication, I contribute to broader development agendas, including the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063. '*I strive to contribute meaningfully to the university's vision of research that informs policy, supports development, and creates lasting societal value*.'

At this stage of my career, I define scholarly impact more holistically. While publication counts and citations remain relevant, I consider how my work influences practice, enriches student research, shapes curricula, and supports institutional quality. '*Impact, for me, includes helping postgraduate students produce quality research… and contributing to academic communities where knowledge is shared and applied*.' I have seen impact as the cumulative result of consistent, thoughtful effort—a quiet influence that extends beyond formal metrics.

Looking ahead, I hope to deepen international collaborations, which were noted as a gap in my previous NRF evaluation. '*I need to apply for my NRF re-rating in a few years… I am working on that now to get a higher rating*.' As I enter the next decade of my research journey, I continue to approach publishing with humility, perseverance, and a sense of purpose,

knowing that scholarship is not only about output but about contribution, mentorship, and lasting engagement with the world of ideas.

Looking ahead: Sustaining academic passion

Looking forward, I remain acutely aware of how the South African higher education sector continues to transform, driven by demands for decolonised knowledge, responsive curricula, and inclusive pedagogy. These shifts challenge me to continually recalibrate my practice, ensuring that my work remains relevant to both national priorities and student realities.

Looking back on two decades (2005–2025) in academia, several moments are particularly meaningful. Each publication still brings a sense of joy and accomplishment. '*I still want to get the champagne out every time an article gets published*.' These moments never lose their novelty. Equally significant have been the milestones of academic promotion—clear affirmations that I am on the right path. However, despite these formal achievements, my greatest sense of purpose has emerged from more personal interactions: '*Seeing that light-bulb moment when* [a student] *understands a concept they struggled with*,' or receiving a simple note of thanks for making a difference in their academic journey.

These moments of fulfilment coexist with periods of fatigue. I felt most energised after completing my PhD, a moment of liberation and possibility. '*It was the greatest relief, and the world felt like my oyster*.' In contrast, the present has brought a sense of depletion. '*I am out of research ideas, and I have little motivation*,' acknowledging a phase of low energy and waning interest in conferences and publishing.

Recognising and managing burnout has become essential. I have learned that the feeling of '*I do not want to*' signals the need to pause. I am now more intentional about taking breaks throughout the year and setting boundaries, particularly in disconnecting from work emails while on leave, to ensure full rest and recovery. As Ellis et al. (2011) noted, self-care is both a methodological and ethical imperative in academic work, particularly given the emotional labour embedded in academic roles.

Despite these cycles, certain elements continue to sustain my academic passion. Watching students succeed and graduate provides a purpose, while the publication process remains affirming. '*Pursuing new knowledge makes research interesting and is something I am passionate about*.' Students, in particular, reignite this enthusiasm. Their curiosity and growth challenge me to remain present and responsive.

Maintaining boundaries has been crucial to balancing passion with sustainability. I reject the narrative that success in academia requires overwork. '*I do not work longer hours even if it may mean more publications. I am satisfied with my current output levels*.' I have resisted the culture of glorified overwork by prioritising rest, reflection, and reading—particularly fiction—as a form of intellectual and emotional renewal. Though sabbaticals are rare due to ongoing academic responsibilities, creative pursuits, and non-academic interests remain vital. '*Currently, my recharge lies mainly in reading fiction, allowing me to escape to other worlds*.'

Staying pedagogically and intellectually responsive means remaining alert to change. I do this by '*continuously reading*,' especially in the light of rapid corporate reporting and AI developments. I am curious to enhance my use of AI in research, analysis and teaching, and to pursue new questions emerging in the ever-evolving field of corporate reporting.

As I look ahead, I hope to deepen international collaboration and explore more transdisciplinary work. These aspirations reflect institutional priorities and a personal desire to continue learning. In imagining my legacy, I hope to be remembered simply for '*being kind, willing to help, supportive*.'

I offer this reminder to my future self: '*Stay grounded by remembering why you started—your love of learning, your commitment to integrity, and your belief in the power of education to shape lives*.' Let the small wins—the student breakthrough, the appreciated mentorship, the meaningful conversation—serve as enduring sources of inspiration. This echoes Ellis et al. (2011), who emphasise the emotional dimensions of academic life and the value of personal meaning-making in sustaining engagement.

Moreover, I offer counsel to others beginning this journey: '*Give yourself time*.' Academia is not a sprint but a long, evolving journey of growth. Build strong foundations, embrace feedback, and find joy in the process. Your value lies not only in outputs but in the authenticity, care, and purpose you bring to your work. Adams and Herrmann (2021) argue that bringing care into teaching and supervision challenges dominant performance metrics and reaffirms the relational foundation of scholarly work. The road to academia may be complex, but it is also deeply rewarding for those who walk it with intention and resilience.

Autoethnography, understood as a somatic practice (Adams et al., 2023), has helped me listen to the intellectual and embodied signs of fatigue and curiosity. Recognising this wholeness has been essential in charting a sustainable academic future.

CONCLUSION

This autoethnography affirms the dual reality of academic life: it is both deeply rewarding and, at times, profoundly under-supported. Much is expected of academics across teaching, research, and service, yet formal preparation for navigating this complex terrain remains scarce (Behari-Leak, 2017). My journey illustrates that professional identity is not forged through training alone, but shaped gradually through lived experience, relationships, and sustained reflection. In sharing this account, I offer a personal narrative and a window into the systemic expectations and constraints within South African higher education.

The themes explored—from postgraduate supervision and gendered emotional labour to academic citizenship—echo broader challenges documented in the literature on academic identity (Henkel, 2005), emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), and the changing academic profession (Teichler et al., 2013). This alignment reinforces the wider relevance of my reflections for others navigating similar landscapes.

Over two decades, I have confronted imposter syndrome, redefined leadership as quiet and collaborative, and learned to set boundaries that sustain both well-being and curiosity. These turning points reflect the value of autoethnography as both a research method and a developmental practice, enabling academics to make sense of disorienting dilemmas and align personal values with professional roles (Adams et al., 2015; O'Neil, 2016).

For educators, my story underscores that academic identity is not fixed but continually reshaped by shifting institutional cultures, evolving responsibilities, and personal convictions. Mentorship, supervision, and care work—often undervalued—are integral to scholarly contribution. Institutions must also recognise the emotional and service labour that underpins quality teaching and academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007).

From this narrative, readers might take away that:

- Reflection is scholarship—sustained self-examination is essential to professional growth (Mezirow, 1991; Moon, 2000).
- Boundaries preserve longevity—balancing personal and professional life protects curiosity and prevents burnout.
- Mentorship is generative—guiding students enriches the mentor's own scholarly journey (Chang et al., 2014; Lechuga, 2011).

- Emotional labour matters—acknowledging the relational dimension of teaching fosters more empathetic academic cultures (Boyd, 2008; Hochschild, 1983).
- Academic citizenship shapes culture—intentional service work can strengthen inclusivity and institutional values (Macfarlane, 2007).

My reflections are inseparable from the socio-political history of South African higher education. The legacies of apartheid-era exclusion, language politics, and institutional privilege still shape academic opportunities and identities. Entering the academy during a period of national transformation, I witnessed the evolution of institutional roles alongside wider imperatives for equity, access and inclusion. Some changes, such as the shift from dual-medium to English-only instruction, expanded accessibility but also prompted tensions around cultural loss and linguistic identity. These dynamics have created both constraints—in the form of slow-moving structural change and inherited inequalities—and possibilities, including opportunities for academics to act as agents of transformation through mentorship, curriculum development, and citizenship.

A persistent thread through my experience is the absence of structured preparation for academic work. Like many, I was expected to perform across multiple domains without adequate pedagogical grounding or induction (Behari-Leak, 2017; De Rijdt et al., 2013). Initially, my practice was shaped more by imitation than intention. Over time, lived experience, collegial support, and critical reflection—including the autoethnographic process itself—have allowed me to transform challenge into capacity.

Another enduring theme is the emotional and relational nature of academic work. Whether providing pastoral care to students or navigating institutional inertia, this labour remains largely invisible in formal metrics (Adams et al., 2015; Hochschild, 1983). However, precisely this work, especially in postgraduate supervision, gives the role its human depth. Likewise, my teaching innovations—from case-based learning to integrating online modalities—were driven not by technology alone but by an ethic of care, grounded in responsiveness and presence.

Ultimately, this account challenges institutions to move beyond compliance-based professional development and embrace reflective, iterative, and emotionally intelligent support models. Academic fulfilment is possible even in resource-constrained environments, but it depends on trust, autonomy, and recognition. Quiet leadership, often enacted outside formal positions, can be a powerful force for cultural change when grounded in empathy, consistency, and integrity.

Academic life is demanding and fragmented, yet within it are spaces for coherence, connection, and purpose. Professional growth is not only about content mastery or career advancement; it is about engaging with one's work and self with depth, care, and authenticity. For those starting out or seeking renewal, I offer this: your academic journey will be shaped as much by the relationships you cultivate, the boundaries you honour, and the outputs you produce. In these spaces of intention, empathy, and quiet influence, the vocation of academia finds its most enduring rewards.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Elda du Toit: Conceptualization; methodology; data curation; resources; formal analysis; project administration; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft; investigation; validation; visualization.

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Elda du Toit https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8386-7969

Endnote

[1] Text in italics represent the author's personal reflections directly from the self-interview.

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