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Key competencies for academic employees in the current dynamic higher education environment

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to conceptualise the key competencies for academic employees in the current dynamic South African higher education environment. Key competencies that enable these employees to perform and meet their work challenges in the dynamic environment they operate in need to be identified to ensure relevant talent and performance management practices are implemented for the success of the institution. A qualitative research approach was utilised in the study with a critical realist perspective as the study involved various participants in gathering different views to present key competencies of academic employees. A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the study. Atlas.ti 22 was used to analyse the data. Three main competencies were identified for each strata in the study namely pedagogy competencies, personal efficiency and organisational competencies. The findings in the study highlight that academic institutions and practitioners need to align the development of academic employees with the expectations of the stakeholders, employees and strategic imperatives of institutions. The study contributes a competency model that can be utilised for managing and developing academic employees.

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Introduction

Orientation

Higher education requires competent academic employees to meet the expectations of various stakeholders. Society, the world of work, and student profiles are constantly changing thus amplifying the need for competent academic employees. Competencies refer to the skills, knowledge, motivations, and values that individuals operationalise to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Kowal et al., 2022). The dynamic academic environment requires increasingly more skills from employees. It is, therefore, imperative to explore these required competencies in a South African environment that is also faced with challenges such as staff shortage, student accessibility, research development, affordability, infrastructure limitations, and other socio-economic aspects. The stakeholders involved in the South African higher education sector hold academic institutions to their mandates and expect that all performance goals are met for the sector to remain sustainable.

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Research purpose and objectives

The study aims to conceptualise the key competencies for academics in the current dynamic South African higher education environment. Competencies of academic employees are explored in the current dynamic environment to develop a competency model relevant for academic employees.

Literature review

Competencies in higher education

The dynamic environment in higher education in terms of new developments and challenges in recent years has given rise to a continuous debate about the ability of academic employees to respond to these developments and challenges. The modern student, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, funding issues in the higher education sector, and the increased use of technology have all contributed to already existing challenges in higher education institutions (Matos et al., 2022). Academic employees must be competent to respond to these challenges and to find opportunities to maximise their performance output. These aspects contribute to improving the employability of academic employees. The word 'competencies' is derived from 'competence', which refers to the individual's performance abilities to complete workplace tasks and achieve life outcomes (Fraser-Arnott, 2017). These abilities include personality traits that can be associated with communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership abilities, and goal setting and attainment (Blanka et al., 2022; Yoon & Han, 2018). The world of work has evolved and academic employees are therefore required to demonstrate the relevant skills to meet their obligations. These skills are often referred to as 21st century skills. A variety of definitions of these 21st century skills exist; however, they can be defined as a broad range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes incorporated with the use of improved technologies to succeed in dynamic workplaces (Scott, 2015). Chalkiadaki (2018), goes further to categorise these skills into four attributes, namely personal skills, social skills, information and knowledge and digital literacy. Academic employees have to ensure that they can use these skills to achieve performance objectives in the current environment.

The role of the lecturer is based on three main dimensions, namely teaching and learning, research, and community involvement. An academic employee therefore must be able to achieve expected outcomes in those dimensions as observable competencies are measurable (Long et al., 2013). The competence of academic employees is relevant as it has a direct impact on the performance of the student and the institution (Long et al., 2013). Students' perspectives on the competence of academic employees are important as they are direct recipients of the lecturers' attributes and abilities thus making them valuable in assessing lecturers' performance (Latip et al., 2020). Professional development of academic employees is needed to ensure competence, which at times is related to their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy of academic employees is related to these employees' confidence in their abilities to successfully complete tasks related to teaching, research, administration, and community engagement activities (Sharp et al., 2013).

Higher education institutions have been affected by the changes in the internal and external environment in which their employees operate. Consequently, this has resulted in new ways of teaching and conducting research, which tests the competence of lecturers (Crabtree et al., 2020). Further research regarding the new ways academic employees have had to learn to operate due to the drastic and unprecedented nature of the change – especially in the South African environment – must be conducted. The readiness, competence, and management of academic staff members in this regard are critical to ensure the sustainability of the higher education environment in South Africa.

The Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa (DHET) is responsible for ensuring that institutions deliver in terms of their strategic imperatives and related constituents. Challenges in the sector relate to the capabilities of academic staff, staff/student ratios, transformation issues, and the number of academic staff in general (DHET, 2019). The DHET acknowledges that to achieve all the major goals in spite of these challenges, capable academic employees are needed (Barnes et al., 2022). One of the major issues is an ageing workforce and the struggle to retain young competent employees (Subbaye, 2018). However, employees are also responsible for improving their own competency. They

have to ensure that they are competent to teach, to conduct research, and to perform academic community-related tasks (Matsepe et al., 2020).

Competency frameworks for academic employees

Previous studies have conceptualised frameworks to highlight specific competencies that academic employees should possess. The development of such a framework requires specific skills, knowledge, and behaviours to be included in the categories of the theoretical frameworks (Milner et al., 2011). Competency frameworks assist in ensuring that academics achieve the performance goals, and that professional development activities are streamlined and assessable. Milner et al. (2011), refer to the framework that was conceptualised by Bland et al. (2009); Afandi (2021) and list faculty-specific competencies for their framework. This framework list includes professional competencies, education competencies, research competencies, communication competencies, and administrative competencies. Perumal and Maistry (2020) identified five main themes related to relevant competencies that academic employees require to develop their abilities, namely teaching competence, student-related competence, programme and administration competence, relationship-building competence, and research competence. It is worth noting that all the themes had specific sub-themes associated with the competence of employees. Of significance here is that although the DHET has a policy framework for qualifying academic employees (DHET, 2013), this framework has not been used to its full purpose of developing specific competencies of academic employees.

Programmes, such as the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), since 2017 have been developed to develop the skills of academics entering the sector. These programmes focus on the research, teaching, and learning competence of academic employees to address various issues facing the sector (Kruss et al., 2015; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). Joint Education Trust [JET] Services (2019) recently established that most academics in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions are either unqualified or underqualified, which negatively affects their competence and professional development. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) highlights specific competencies that TVET lecturers should possess. These include subject matter knowledge, effective communication skills, the ability to understand students, relevant assessment skills, critical and theoretical knowledge, technological skills, and contextual understanding of the environment (DHET, 2013). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) proposes eight competencies for those involved in teaching and learning, namely specialised knowledge, knowledge of information and communications technology (ICT), understanding of economic and social contexts, the ability to develop generic skills, collaboration, integration of teaching and research, and innovation (ILO, 2010).

A study conducted by Chakroun (2019), examined the similarities among different countries and professional organisations in terms of the competencies of academic employees. This study laid the way for conceptualising the competencies of academic employees in South Africa to ensure that the strategic imperatives of the DHET are met in a timely and effective manner without compromising student development. Very few studies identify competencies for academic employees in a university setting as these studies generally address TVET institutions (Van der Bijl & Oosthuizen, 2019). The lack of research in this regard again highlights the need for research on the competencies of university lecturers to identify the specific competencies required.

Developing a relevant competency framework for South African academics requires that various stakeholder perspectives be examined in the process. The stakeholders for the current study included teaching and learning support services, students, academic employees, DHET, external organisations (top employer organisations) and internal human resource employees at the institution where the academic participants in the study are employed.

Relevant stakeholders

Teaching and learning support service hubs are vital for the continuous development of academics to ensure that effective research, teaching, and learning are provided and that quality graduates are produced by the institutions (Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). The DHET is clear in its 2022-2023 annual

performance plan that lecturers have to be equipped with critical skills to deliver relevant training to students (DHET, 2021). The role of the human resource department is to ensure that human capital is used effectively but also to fulfil common main roles such as attraction, recruitment, development, and retention of competent staff (Rafiei & Davari, 2015). The DHET expects effective planning to ensure a balanced staff compliment. It further expects higher education institutions to ensure that departmental, individual, and organisational goals are aligned. The human resource departments in these institutions have the responsibility of developing the competence of academic staff to achieve these deliverables. Best talent management practices have to be kept in mind when developing employees (Musakuro, 2022). The current study believes that for human resource departments to understand which competencies are critical for the development of talent management, the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders, whether directly or indirectly concerned with the higher education sector, have to be taken into account.

Students fulfil a crucial role in the higher education system as they are direct stakeholders in the sector. Access to higher education is expensive, consequently students expect significant positive outcomes from the teaching and learning experiences that they encounter during their studies (Kay et al., 2010). It is important for students to have competent lecturers as it affects the quality of education that students receive. This again illustrates the critical need for developing competency frameworks for academics. Previous studies did not report much on organisational competence which also highlights the difference between previous studies and the current study. In addition, the perception of academic employees regarding their competencies in the current environment cannot be ignored as it also informs the direction that institutions in collaboration with all the relevant stakeholders have to consider during the decision-making process. Previous studies have mainly focused only on talent management practices related to retaining academic employees (Bussin, 2014; Musakuro, 2022; Robyn & Du Preez, 2013). Specific research is needed to address competencies related to South African academic employees for relevance and applicability. The study aims to conceptualise key competencies for academic employees by exploring the perspectives of stakeholder regarding the key competencies that academic employees require in the current dynamic environment.

Research design

Research approach

The study uses a qualitative research method. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to understand underlying patterns and processes through the gathering of rich data (Grund & Walter, 2015). The approach allows researchers to understand the descriptive meanings of participants' experiences (Tuffour, 2017). The focus of the study is on conceptualising key competencies of academic employees. A qualitative research approach is therefore relevant for such a study. As the study involved various stakeholders, a critical realist paradigm was used to understand the various perspectives and offered solutions of the participants. Critical realism (CR) focuses on understanding social relations and causation elements in complex systems (Bogna et al., 2020). The ontological stance of CR distinguishes experiences, describes them, and aims to understand the causation of reality (Mukumbang & van Wyk, 2020). Epistemology in CR is concerned with the knowledge attained from the assumption that individuals have mind-independent reality thus changing over time (Albert et al., 2020).

Research participants and sampling methods

Purposive stratified sampling was used in the study as it allowed the researcher the opportunity to be specific with regard to the study population meeting the set inclusion criterion (Robinson, 2014). The study population consisted of different strata, which included academic employees and academic managers, students, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Department of Higher Education and Training, the internal human resource department of the institution, and the external human resource departments of employers in the South African job market. The inclusion criteria for students included students that registered at the institution in 2019 for the first time as they experienced the different

dynamics in higher education than previous cohorts. Excluded from the study were academics and students from the same school the researcher is employed in. Academic managers were included in the study as they would be aware of the competencies that have to be developed to enable staff and the institution to effectively achieve goals. Staff development services in the form of the Centre for Teaching and Learning were considered necessary for the study as these employees are aware of modern trends and the competencies required of academic staff. Human resource practitioners – both internal and external were included as they are involved in the recruitment of academic personnel and graduates and would therefore know which skills are necessary for effective performance. Interviews were conducted with 31 participants. The population consisted of (n = 12) academics (different levels ranging from junior lecturer to professor level); students (n = 6); Centre for teaching and learning (n = 4); employers (external HR) (n = 4); internal human resource practitioners (n = 4); and Department of Higher Education and Training (n = 1, minister feedback based on the questions provided to his office)

Data collection

Data was collected utilising online semi-structured interviews. The interviews were audio and video recorded for transcription and coding purposes. The data collection process entailed first obtaining consent from participants to participate and to be recorded during the study. Before the start of each individual interview consent to record the interview was again obtained from each participant. It is important to note that participants did not have access to the interview questions prior to the scheduled interviews. The data collection process involved making participants aware of the study through appropriate protocols and permission relevant to each stratum. Each respondent completed an online consent form to participate in the study and received a formal invitation for the research interview to commence. The following are the interview questions that were used to collect the data from the participants.

Competencies

Details are given in [Table 1](#).

Data analysis

Data analysis commenced immediately after the transcription of the interviews had been completed. Atlas.ti 22 was used to analyse the data from the study. The data for each stratum was coded and analysed separately to ensure clarity and data integrity. The codes were then categorised per interview question to allow themes in the coded data to develop. The steps of Braun and Clarke (2021) were followed, these being familiarisation with data, coding data, generating first themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, defining and naming the themes. Microsoft Excel was used to compile graphs of the analysed data to facilitate data cleaning and clarity. To ensure the credibility of the study, a co-coder assisted with ensuring that the codes and themes were consistent. The researcher ensured a clear audit trail of the data collection and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Different sources of stakeholders were utilised in the study to ensure comprehensive feedback was provided. All the participants had to meet specific criteria for relevance to the study.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview: Questions for academics and various other stakeholders.

Questions for academics	Questions for stakeholders
1. Which skills, abilities, and knowledge are important in your job? a. Why are they important?	1. According to you, which skills, abilities, and knowledge are important for academics? a. Why are they important?
2. How important are these skills, abilities, and knowledge in your work for the future?	2. How important are these skills, abilities, and knowledge in academics' work for the future?
3. What can you do to enhance your skills, abilities, and knowledge now and in the future?	3. What can institutions do to enhance skills, abilities, and knowledge of academics now and in the future?

Ethical considerations

The necessary ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the institution concerned. An ethics committee cleared the study as a minimal risk study, ethics number NWU-00859-20-A4. All the participants were made aware of the format of the study and the manner in which findings would be disseminated. Consent to audio and video record participants during the interview was obtained prior to the commencement of the interviews. The safety of all participants was safeguarded by safely storing all the recorded interviews on a password encrypted device to ensure that there are no data leaks, breaches of confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher obtained permission from the relevant gatekeepers where applicable to conduct the study and to access each stratum.

Results

The results of the study present an overview of the conceptualised key competencies for academics in the current dynamic South African higher education environment. The following figures represent the results of the data collected from the various participants in the study. The results are responses to the interview questions posed to the participants in the study. Different strata are represented in the study as indicated earlier.

Figure 1 represents the findings on key competencies for academic employees. Three central themes were identified in the findings, namely *pedagogical competencies*, *personal effectiveness competencies*, and *organisational competencies*. These themes will be addressed in the discussion section. Pedagogy and personal efficiency competencies are the leading competency themes for most research populations, with the exception of the students' strata where personal efficiency competency is the only theme, HR strata with only pedagogy and personal efficiency and CTL where organisational competencies is the second most coded theme. Themes related to the importance of these competencies and how to enhance them, were also developed. Identified themes for importance are continuous development and interpersonal skills themes while those for enhancing employee's skills are continuous development which includes continuous development interventions, pedagogy interventions and training interventions. Tables 2 and 3 below represents the different themes for importance and enhancement categories.

Table 2 above focuses on themes that emerged from what is deemed as important for having competencies identified for employees. Two main themes emerged namely continuous development with its own codes as to why it is seen as important. Followed by interpersonal skills as being one of the main reasons employees see their competencies being important.

Table 3 above focuses on what can be utilised to enhance employees' competencies. Overall, continuous development can be utilised with other interventions such as pedagogy and training.

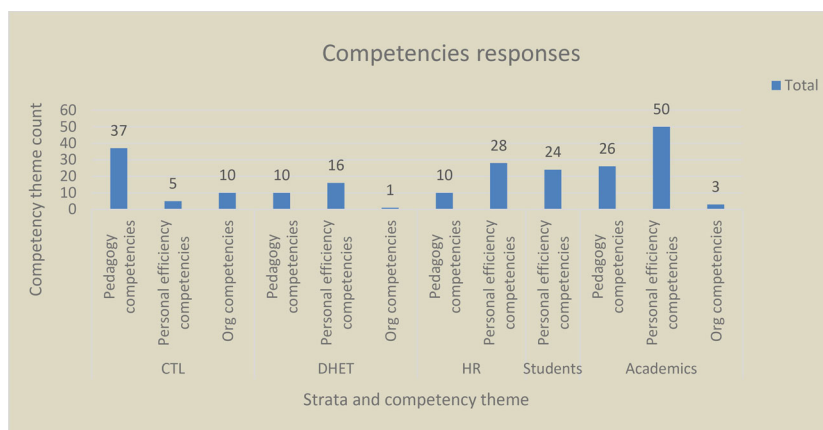


Figure 1. Competency themes.

Table 2. Importance.

Themes	
Continuous Development	Interpersonal skills
Upskill	Communication
Continuous development	Diversity awareness
Training	Engaging
Adapt	Knowledge transfer skills
Industry exposure	Facilitation skills

Table 3. Enhancement.

Continuous Development		
Continuous Development Interventions	Pedagogy Interventions	Training interventions
Exchange programmes	Promote pedagogy	Best practice scenarios
Professional development	Constant research	Training
Continuous Development	Formal teaching qualification(s)	Workshops
Development Opportunities	Curriculum changes	Short courses
Industry Exposure	Teaching and learning integration	Webinars
Involvement	Curriculum development	Upskill
Technology	–	Learning

Table 4. Pedagogy subthemes.

Pedagogy competencies	
Technical competence	Knowledge Competence
- Assessment skills - Curriculum design - Pedagogy - Teaching skills	- Academic citizenship - Disciplinary expertise - Epistemic cognition - Knowledge - Practical application - Research skills

Discussion

Three main competency themes were identified based on data from all the strata. The themes for the study are defined below. *Pedagogy competencies* refer to skills that are based on subject knowledge, teaching, and learning practices with the ability to conduct research for subject-based teaching and learning (Guerriero, 2014). Pedagogical competence includes the ability to design curriculums, understand student characteristics and student development, assessment, and student evaluation (Madhavaram & Laverie, 2010). *Personal efficiency competencies* refer to the skills that employees use to achieve their goals. These relate to skills that enhance employee performance, social relations, and general attitudes or actions in terms of work dynamics (Sanyal et al., 2016).

The theme of *organisational competencies* refers to skills that employees work towards for the benefit and improvement of the institution in general. These skills vary as they refer to aspects that involve the institution's growth through academic employees' abilities to conceptualise their skills to satisfy the institution's needs. *Organisational competencies* refer to skills that focus on the strategic imperatives of the institution as they are occupational requirements for job incumbents.

Regarding the importance of competencies, *continuous development* refers to individuals updating their skills, abilities, professional knowledge to meet organisational needs, individual goals, and market trends (Moonasar & Underwood, 2018). *Interpersonal skills* refer to intellectual skills, communication skills, cultural awareness, conflict management and general facilitation skills (Warner, 2020).

Enhancement category refers to what can be done to improve on the competencies of academic employees that are seen as important.

The findings of the study are discussed under each theme with examples. Only the prevalent codes are discussed per the theme (Table 4).

Figure 2 illustrates the themes identified in the study.

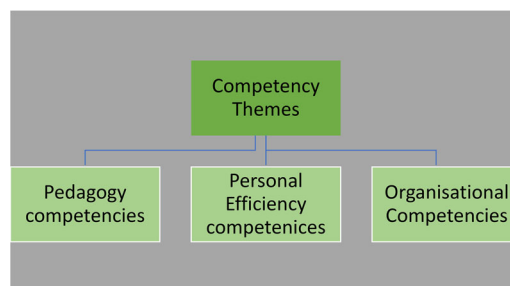


Figure 2. Competency themes.

Pedagogy competency themes

Codes for pedagogy competencies include assessment skills, curriculum design, disciplinary expertise, epistemic cognition, knowledge, pedagogy, research, and teaching skills. Pedagogy is seen as a critical part of the higher education sector. So, what skills do they need? Ah, a responsive pedagogy. So not only a pedagogical approach but a responsive pedagogical approach. Responsive pedagogy refers to the ability or capacity to respond (Barad, 2007). Response-able (i.e. the ability to respond in an appropriate way) pedagogies, refer to processes that allow various role players to be in a constant exchange of knowledge and practices in their environments (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). The ability to respond in these interactions, from a relational ontological stance, enables transformation to take place as these interactions allow role players to enable each other to be capable (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017).

Teaching skills

Lecturers educate, transform, conduct research, and engage in community activities (Retnowati et al., 2021). Competencies in terms of them being able to teach you to know, in the classroom or out of [the] classroom. Optimal performance by lecturers ensures the sustainability of the institution and the sector.

Pedagogy

Academic staff must update their skills and knowledge in the different methodologies and technologies used in teaching to ensure that knowledge transfer can result in competent students that contribute to the broader society (Leibowitz et al., 2017). Subject knowledge or technical comprehension of the subject being taught to easily transfer knowledge to the learners.

Academic citizenship

Academic citizenship is regarded as one of the most important competencies required of academics to ensure the effective functioning of the sector. Allow the academic person to fully participate as an academic citizen. Ensure ability to participate in discourses or discussions related to technical areas. Academic citizenship includes a range of activities, such as research, publishing, and teaching that employees have to be involved in to be loyal to the course of academia (Coldwell et al., 2016).

Discipline skills and knowledge

Disciplinary expertise 'good teaching is grounded in a deep understanding of their discipline. So, they have to understand their discipline'.

The view above coincides with that of disciplinary discourse, which has an implied point of view suggesting that it is often challenging to articulate specific messages or meanings making it difficult for students to follow such a teaching approach (Bennett et al., 2018). The study suggests the interaction between academic literacy practitioners and lecturers to address and teach trends of their discipline to students (Veitch et al., 2018). Academic literacy should, therefore, focus on making the invisible process clearer for students.

Practical application

Academic staff must be competent in how they relate theoretical concepts to students so that the students can make sense of theoretical work in a practical manner. *I think most importantly for me was for a lecturer to be able to relate their theoretical knowledge with some sort of practical stances. So, I remember my most successful lecturer had quite a bit of experience in terms of the corporate world, and could give us hands-on examples of how certain principles and theories could be applied in the workplace.*

Research skills

Research skills are embedded in the academic profession for lecturers, and possessing such proficiency aligns with the performance objectives of these employees. 'I think what's important for academics is that they should have research skills'. The performance of lecturers is measured by their ability to achieve their objectives with regard to research (Nurdiyanto & Vem, 2016; Waghid, 2018).

Personal efficiency competency theme

Personal efficiency competencies are represented in Table 5 below, followed by a discussion of the most prevalent codes.

Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills have been highlighted in various strata in the study. Interpersonal skills are seen to nurture positive relations between lecturers and students (Majid, 2017).

Like with the advent of the fourth industrial revolution that's ... feel free to roll your eyes, I know, ... but unfortunately it is a thing and having this openness in communication. I think being able to have that human factor is going to become even more important.

Self-directedness

Academic employees do not only have to provide self-directed learning for students but also have to be self-directed in their teaching and research practices (Du Toit-Brits, 2018). 'To become a researcher, you need certain skills. If you don't have the time you need to have the ability or the attribute of a self-directed learner to acquire these things in ways that are suitable for your context'.

Administrative skills

Administrative skills are crucial to the delivery of content to students and those in charge of knowledge dissemination often have to fulfil various roles (Van der Vyver et al., 2021).

Perumal and Maistry (2020) view administrative skills as a job requirement for academic employees.

Table 5. Personal efficiency subthemes.

Personal efficiency competencies		
Interpersonal competencies	Cognitive competencies	Technical competencies
• Administrative skills • Brave • Communication • Confidence • Diversity • Engaging • Leadership • Patience • Self-directedness • Teamwork • Time management	• Analytical • Critical thinking • Memorise • Problem-solving • Upskill	• Technology skills

And then just being organised, being able to put things in a way that we can understand that this needs to be handed in by this date, this is the type of work, and not just saying 'there is the handbook, go through it'.

Communication skills

Academics must be adept at transferring knowledge to students to ensure that learning outcomes are met (Fredericks & Alexander, 2021). 'Ability to write and communicate clearly, especially in interaction with low literacy learners, given that some of the learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have communication limitations'.

Diversity

Exploring cultural diversity promotes the ability of academic employees to expand their teaching methods to accommodate the needs of different students (Cook-Sather, 2020).

So, like you need to be culturally diverse and like maybe other types of races, people interact, and how do you get to a point where you respect their spaces and they respect your spaces as well.

Problem-solving skills

Lecturers are tasked with the challenging role of ensuring that critical thinking skills are developed in students. Possessing problem solving skills enables lecturers to overcome various challenges that they encounter in their roles (Asyari et al., 2016).

Not having a dimensional way of thinking, you know, because what I am teaching deals with real-life problems that needs to be solved. So, as a lecturer and as a student, you need to think outside your own box to solve such problems.

Time management

Academic employees rank time management skills as one of the core skills that are critical to reaching maximum performance in their roles. It is also important that academic staff must ensure that the personal aspects of their lives do not interfere with their work (Martin et al., 2019; Varvel, 2007).

Then also, you know, skills related to time management. I think have been difficult for me, but that's more like a personality thing that I tend to procrastinate and, you know, I do well under pressure. So, I tend to wait until I am under pressure. But I think having good time management skills and, you know, skills that boost your efficiency might be helpful.

Technology

Responses from participants in the specific stratum highlighted the role that technology plays in teaching compared to previous years where there were no significant technological improvements.

You know, to use, ... in the old days when you were taught how to teach you would use a poster and a koki [a marker or felt-tip pen] and you would write on the board and that kind of thing, and that's now old-school.

Organisational competency theme

The theme of organisational competence was only found in the stratum mentioned in the following discussions of the theme. Furthermore, Table 6 below indicates the represented stratum data.

The codes for organisational competencies included 21st century skills, which one participant sees as '... specifically talks about curriculum challenges and transformation imperatives to include 4IR into our curriculums'. This notion is supported by the views of Anderson (2008) that curriculums have to change

Table 6. Organisational competencies.

Organisational competencies		
Academics	CTL	DHET
Higher education landscape understanding	21st century skills Student success Transformation	Policy knowledge

to accommodate student growth and development of 21st century skills with the focus on where and how these competencies can be acquired. Academic employees must be involved in the development of curriculums to ensure transformative imperatives are met.

Student success was seen as referring to improving student access. 'These must improve, particularly at undergraduate level but also at post-graduate level. Student success is a complex issue. One important factor affecting it is academics' ability to teach in ways that respond to students' learning needs'. The assertion is that the country is failing to produce enough competent graduates to meet the country's targets and individual needs, therefore, access without success is futile (DHET, 2017).

Transformation is seen as important to assist in solving societal challenges. 'So, if you understand how the brain processes information decolonisation becomes a no-brainer. It's not debatable. We have to regard the socio-cultural diversity of our students'. The transformation agenda (2020-2030) is clearly specified in the White Paper commissioned by the Development Bank of Southern Africa, which recommends substantial transformation for institutional cultures to be aligned with constitutional ideals and values (Badat, 2010).

Policy knowledge is pivotal to the access, performance, and success of students (DHET, 2014), '... knowledge of the Constitution of South Africa and higher education policy goals and strategies'.

Academic staff operate in a dynamic environment where change is ever-present. Employees must contribute to the sector to meet national and global demands (Fomunyan, 2017). One of the participants had the following opinion regarding the importance of understanding the higher education landscape: 'I think you need those skills as well to understand, kind of, why we have the problems we have within higher education that's more like knowledge, right? Knowledge of how the system works and why it works the way it works and, kind of, systemically what the problems are within the system'.

Importance category

The upskilling of employees is crucial for employees to be updated with modern trends (MacPhail et al., 2019). Participants said the following about the upskilling of employees: 'So up-skilling and improving on that skill set are really going to be very important because those the environments or the platforms that we are using are not familiar to everybody and I think that is where we need to see a huge improvement'.

These skills are important for the sustainability of the employees' careers and transferring skills to students.

Enhance category

Enhancing these competencies is crucial for academic employees to be able to perform effectively in their roles, transfer knowledge to students, produce graduates and meet stakeholder expectations (Alayoubi et al., 2020). Data analysis revealed an overarching theme of continuous development of academic employees. Continuous development could be achieved through professional development initiatives that assist employees to reach the required performance levels:

I think they determine basically how if I can say how well you'll be able to do your job. So obviously I mean if you're not performing then it's a problem, but the importance just lies in I think as well as not so much personal but professional development as well.

Pedagogy development included 'Promoting research in teaching and learning and disciplinary pedagogics'. While training interventions included workshops, webinars and short courses: 'So with I would say both ways, on the calendar for your own university, short webinars or workshops, where the

Table 7. The three-step academic employee competence model.

	Competence definition	Main aspects	Intervention for competence
1. Pedagogy	Pedagogy competencies refer to skills that are based on subject knowledge, teaching, and learning practices with the ability to conduct research for subject-based teaching and learning (Guerriero, 2014).	Technical competence and knowledge competence (refer to Table 4).	Pedagogy interventions (e.g. promoting research skills, teaching skills) and professional development/training interventions (workshops, webinars and short courses); and development opportunities.
2. Personal efficiency	Personal efficiency competencies refer to the skills that employees use to achieve their goals. These relate to skills that enhance employee performance, social relations, and general attitudes or actions in terms of work dynamics (Sanyal et al., 2016).	Interpersonal competencies, cognitive competencies and technical competencies (refer to Table 5).	Continuous development; professional development/training interventions (workshops, webinars and short courses) and development opportunities.
3. Organisational competence	Organisational competencies refer to skills that focus on the strategic imperatives of the institution as they are occupational requirements for job incumbents. These competencies ensure the relevancy and competitiveness of organisations in the market (Barth et al., 2007; Kruss et al., 2015).	Higher education landscape understanding, 21st century skills, policy knowledge, student success and transformation (refer to Table 6).	Continuous development; professional development/training interventions (workshops, webinars and short courses) and development opportunities.

lecturers can just fall in and learn, but also perhaps longer short courses that they can attend with online versions like Coursera or open education learning’.

Three-step academic employee competence model

Based on the study’s findings, the model below can be utilised in the training and development of academic employees to ensure their competence and that they attain their personal and professional goals. The three-step academic employee competence model addresses three main competencies, specific aspects that should be developed, and which interventions can be utilised to ensure their development. Table 7 below represents the model.

Practical implications

The findings of the study indicate that some aspects are common among the study population. The most common codes across themes were administrative skills, communication, interpersonal skills, pedagogy, knowledge, research, and technological skills, which indicate that all these competencies support and complement the role that the academic employees fulfil. The role of the academic employee is essential to the development of students and reaching institutional goals. It, however, is clear that employees have to constantly improve their skills to meet demands presented by the dynamic environment in which they operate. The diverse perspectives found in the three main themes are indicative of the need for academic employees to develop themselves and others. The participants also indicated that the constant development of academic employees ensures their readiness for change in the system (Adam & Hanafi, 2022). Opportunities to enhance the competency levels of lecturers in terms of personal development, teaching, research, technical, and other relevant pedagogical aspects of their roles have to be made available.

Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that specific practical solutions be implemented in the institution to ensure the effective performance and goal attainment of academic employees.

The practical implications of these findings are that organisations must ensure effective implementation of policies related to the development of academic employees. If there are no policies and practices

supporting this notion policies should be developed. Institutions should ensure that sufficient resources are made available for effective pedagogical practice by academic employees. Training and development of employees should also focus on enhancing the personal effectiveness of employees in their work, which includes teaching, learning, research, and academic citizenship. Human resource practices should be flexible to employees needs and embrace their different developmental needs. Practitioners and institutions should ensure that employees' skills, knowledge, and abilities are adaptable and responsive to environments in which they operate. In essence, training and development of these employees should be relevant, timeous, and accessible and should support the skills needed for optimal performance. Therefore, academic employees should be provided opportunities to develop themselves in their roles. Opportunities provided to employees for development should cater for different perspectives of what is expected from these employees due to stakeholders needs, market trends, demographic challenges, curriculum challenges and technological trends. Employees should also have the autonomy and freedom to develop competencies they regard as important in their roles. Accessibility of some of the development opportunities should not be restricted by technicalities, such as dates and expenses, but rather be readily available for employees to consume at their own pace. Temoso and Myeki (2023) highlight that the total factor productivity for South African universities was 21% less than the possible maximum productivity levels, indicating an array of issues that impact the performance of academic institutions. This, however, highlights the importance of understanding institutions' performance goals and ensuring employees' competence to meet these goals. The impact of this is reflected in the needs of these institutions to remain relevant, competitive and sustainable (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). Utilising the proposed model can effectively ensure that the implications mentioned above are managed and higher education is able to meet its mandate. The model is clear and entails specific competencies, main aspects and interventions that can be utilised to develop, maintain and sustain academic employees.

Limitations and recommendations

A notable limitation in the study relates to the fact that the semi-structured interviews were conducted online, as some participants experienced technical issues, which affected the flow of the interviews. Similar studies were more focused on the retention and talent management of academic employees and not specific to the type of competencies that these employees require to perform optimally. Studies that focused on competency frameworks of academic employees were found to be inconsistent in categorising some of the skills that they included in their frameworks as some definitions and findings overlapped. The above findings limited the amount of relevant research applicable to this specific study.

It is recommended that competency frameworks in similar studies remain consistent in categorising the skills of academic employees to identify relevant competencies in the sector. Face-to-face interviews should be conducted where possible. Quantitative studies could be used for future research to ensure the consistency of competency categories from stakeholders. Furthermore, other higher education institutions could be included in the study to ensure that the results are consistent in other settings and to allow for a more diverse pool to be included in the study.

Conclusion

The study aimed to conceptualise the key competencies of academic employees in the current dynamic environment. Data was collected from various relevant stakeholders in the South African higher education sector. The findings indicate that, in order to perform optimally, academic employees require numerous skills that should be integrated into their roles. The study also indicated that various stakeholders have different expectations and experiences of these employees. Due to the dynamic nature of their field of work, academic employees have to be able to adapt to uncertainty at any given point. To address all these expectations and requirements a guiding framework is required. Three main themes related to the skills required were identified in the study. These are pedagogy, personal efficiency, and organisational skills. The three themes each indicated the skills that each stratum in the study viewed as essential for academics to possess. Based on the findings of this study, the conclusion can be reached

that these competency themes have to be aligned with the expectations and requirements of the stakeholders in higher education. Mabindisa (2021) argues that employee development should focus on the main responsibilities of the job incumbent for it to be effective. Findings in the study reveal three main competency themes should be focused on, specifically, professional development of employees, continuous development and pedagogy development. Opportunities such as workshops, webinars and short course should be provided to enhance these competencies. In this case, to address national, sectoral, institutional, and industry needs, departmental and individual goals should be aligned in the competency framework. The human resource department must take a strong position in the development of employees and incorporate the various needs of the stakeholders in their talent management strategies to ensure that expectations are met and efficiencies are delivered expeditiously. Previous studies mainly focused on various competencies; however, a more specific framework for current higher education dynamics is needed to ensure the sustainability of academic employees and the higher education environment (Nadeem et al., 2021). The value add of the study is that it utilises various stakeholders' perspectives to develop the 'Three-step Academic Employee Competence Model', therefore, not utilising a one-size-fits-all approach (Daniali et al., 2022).

Ethical approval

The study received ethical clearance from the North-West University, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences in South Africa.

Author contributions

The primary researcher of the study is the sole author of the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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