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The transition from graduate to professional: Developing a work identity

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Orientation: Each year graduates exit tertiary institutions with the intention to join the job market and get an opportunity to practice their profession.

Research purpose: This study was aimed at exploring the development of a work identity during the graduate-to-professional transition in the workplace.

Motivation for the study: Graduate programmes are vital to the graduate-to-professional transition, as this is when a work identity forms. During this time, graduates negotiate between identities to adjust and fit into the organisation.

Research approach/design and method: This study employed the qualitative research approach using a constructivist approach. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 10 participants who had recently entered the job market. A thematic data analysis approach was employed using the data analysis software ATLAS.ti.

Main findings: Graduates go through a three-phased transition during the graduate-to-professional transition. A work identity is developed as graduates get familiar with the complexities of the workplace.

Practical/managerial implications: Insights into the graduate-to-professional transition as a work identity develops will enable human resource (HR) professionals to improve the recruitment process and the structure of a graduate programme. In addition, such insights will give managers an opportunity to enhance their approach to mentorship.

Contribution/value-add: This study provides valuable insights for tertiary institutions and organisations to enhance the structure of developmental programmes and support to graduates. Graduates will gain insights into the workplace complexities which in turn will reduce stress and pressure.

Keywords: work identity; graduate; graduate programme; professional identity; skills development; decent work.

Introduction

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2024), one in four young people globally are not in education, employment or training. To address this, the UN created two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are to *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* (SDG4) and to *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all* (SDG8) (https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4). These two SDGs present a challenge for South African organisations. Stats SA (2024) reported that in May 2024, youth unemployment was at 45.5%. Consequently, graduate unemployment in South Africa has also doubled in the last 16 years (MacGinty, 2024). These figures indicate that a tertiary qualification does not automatically mean that graduates secure employment easily (Meyer & Mncayi, 2021). Statistics further indicate that the high graduate unemployment in South Africa is because of a lack of required skills per industry requirements (Mavundla, 2021).

South African organisations may help to reduce this unemployment crisis and contribute to the UN's SDG8 by introducing and implementing more graduate programmes. Graduate programmes are skills development programmes to facilitate the development of technical capability, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills (Dunne, 2013) and authentic identities (Staunton, 2022). Skills development efforts may be viewed as broader capacity-building measures that can enhance the economy to meet future requirements for jobs and technologies (Habiyaremye et al., 2022).

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Skills development is vital in promoting lifelong learning (thus contributing to SDG4), which helps achieve economic development and competitiveness, thus impacting work identity (Olesen, 2020). Work identity is an individual's self-concept based on an individual's understanding of their work role (Sulphey, 2020), which directly impacts work engagement and organisational outcomes (Bester, 2012; Jerez Jerez et al. 2022). To address the complexities of graduates integrating into the workplace, initiatives such as graduate programmes help to facilitate a seamless transition for newcomers. As the graduate-to-professional transition is complex (Chisoro, 2018), we argue that these programmes can contribute to SDG4 and help with SDG8 in creating full and productive employment and decent work. Decent work 'provides a stable work role and motivates individuals to invest in their role, thus promoting the development of a work identity' (Seubert et al., 2021, p. 813). Organisations that are focused on creating a work environment that has a strong sense of decent work are propelled to achieve strategic organisational goals (Yan et al., 2024) and enhance an organisation's reputation, employee productivity, satisfaction and retention (Blustein et al., 2023). Boyle (2022) stated that limited research studies have explored millennials' experiences transitioning from a graduate to a professional identity, which is a sub-dimension of work identity (De Braine, 2012). The research objectives of this study are threefold: firstly, to understand how graduates experience graduate programmes as they transition into professionals; secondly, to understand how these experiences help to form their work identities and thirdly, to present a three-phase graduate-to-professional forming Work Identity framework. To address these objectives, the article is structured as follows: we firstly present the literature review, then secondly, the research methodology and after that, we provide an integrated findings and discussion section, followed by implications for practice, limitations, recommendations for future research and conclusion.

Literature review

Work identity

Work identity is an individual's self-concept based on an individual's understanding of a work role (Sulphey, 2020). It is related to tasks at work and organisational identification (Toivanen, 2021):

> Work identity refers to a work-based self-concept, constituted of a combination of organisational, occupational, and other identities that shape the roles a person adopts and the corresponding ways he or she behaves when performing his or her work. (Walsh & Gordon, 2007, p. 2)

Lloyd et al. (2011) and Toivanen (2021) support the multifaceted nature of work identity. Work identity influences people's actions and how they feel, think and behave (Agostino, 2004; Caza et al., 2018).

Petriglieri et al. (2019) state that people connected to routines, spaces, people and purpose in the workplace are most likely to remain productive and sustain the viability of their work identity. Work identity has sub-dimensions such as professional, occupational, career and organisational identification (Bothma, 2011). In another study, the sub-dimensions of work identity are value congruence, person–organisation fit and work centrality (Bester, 2012). Work identity predicts work engagement (Bester, 2012). It is also positively related to organisational culture (Chulu, 2023) and organisational trust (Van Tonder, 2018).

The formation of work identity

A work identity forms as a shift occurs during the graduate-to-professional transition. This shift begins as graduates decide how membership in each work group within an organisation would benefit them personally (Minogue, 2019). A developing work identity involves graduates feeling like grown-ups and taking up adult roles (Liljeholm & Bejerholm, 2020). Kirpal (2004) stated that 'formalised, regulated structures foster stability and continuity and support an individual in developing a professional orientation and work identity' (p. 212). Work identity is then formed when individuals have personal encounters with occupational skills, work context, work practices and social memberships with an organisation (Meadows & De Braine, 2022). Toivanen (2021) argues that work identity and identity are continuously changing and are reconstructed by an individual's relationships in and outside the workplace. Factors such as:

> ... value systems and cultural origins, organisational culture and practices, industry-related constraints, as well as sociopolitical challenges such as safety, legislation, and historical discrimination influence work identity. (Crafford, 2021, p. 274)

The formation of work identity is not a linear journey, nor is it continuous as it is constantly disrupted, and at times, it involves levels of negotiation (Andersson & Øverlien, 2021). As individuals perform their work and navigate various components in the workplace, a work identity is contracted (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021). Its development is also considered to be an unstable process as it involves a change in context and will only be stable once a person holds a job for a considerable time (Grossman et al., 2020). The development of a work identity is dynamic and is influenced by various factors, such as politics and the economy in the context in which an individual finds themselves (Yang et al., 2020).

Work identity is also formed at the interface between an individual's personal dispositions and work characteristics (Kirpal, 2004). Work characteristics include job demands and resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). The Job Demands Resources Model (JD-R) predicts work identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Job resources such as organisational support, growth opportunities and advancement are the most significant predictors of work identity as opposed to job demands (Bester, 2012; De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020). Organisational support during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has been shown to influence work identity positively (Clayton & De Braine, 2023).

Research design

Research approach

This study followed a qualitative research approach in which the constructivist paradigm was embraced. Qualitative research focuses on investigating events and the outcomes of those events from the subjective perspectives of those involved (Teherani et al., 2015). Constructivism is based on the concept that individuals naturally construct all facets of their lives (Artino et al., 2015), including their work lives.

Research setting

The research setting of this study is an engineering solutions company. The holding company has 30 businesses distributing automotive, industrial and electrical consumable products in most southern African countries, such as South Africa, Kenya, Namibia and Zambia.

Research participants and sampling methods

The population for the study was first-time graduates who obtained a diploma or degree qualification. The sampling criteria were that participants had to be graduates or young professionals who participated in a graduate programme within the engineering solutions organisation over the last 2 years (2020–2022). The young professionals were qualified in the areas of Marketing, Information Technology, Finance and Engineering. There were 10 participants. Permission to conduct research at this organisation was obtained. The sampling criteria used in the study necessitated the use of purposive sampling. The advantage of using this sampling technique is that it maximises the chances of observing phenomena of interest properly (Serra et al., 2018).

Data-collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. Firstly, interviews were conducted with all the participants, as listed in Table 1. Secondly, interviews were conducted with only five participants to gather further data and clarify participant experiences. Participants were sent an invitation to participate in the study. Participants provided informed consent. The primary author works for the organisation and obtained contact details of possible participants. Data saturation was eventually reached after all the interviews were conducted.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

To ensure credibility, member checks were conducted. A detailed description of the research process and the methods employed is provided in detail to ensure transferability. Dependability is related to the stability of findings over time and how the evaluation of participant findings, interpretation and recommendations is supported by the data collected from the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The audit trail technique was used to address dependability. This was done by recording every step of the research process, from the interviews to the finalisation of the data analysis. Reflexive analysis was used to address

TABLE 1: Summary of participants' demographics.

Participant No.	Age (years)	Race	Gender	Qualification at graduation	Profession
1	25	African	Female	BA IT: Business Systems	IT Graduate Trainee
2	24	African	Female	BCom: Marketing	Sales & Marketing trainee
3	23	African	Male	Diploma: Accountancy	Finance Graduate Trainee
4	24	African	Male	BEng: Mechanical Engineering	Engineering Graduate Trainee
5	24	African	Female	Diploma: Safety Management	SHEQ Graduate Trainee
6	25	African	Female	Diploma: Marketing	Administrative Clerk
7	24	African	Female	BCom: Accounting	Junior Accountant
8	26	African	Female	National Diploma: Safety Management	SHEQ Coordinator
9	28	African	Male	Diploma: Electrical Engineering	Junior Technician
10	27	African	Male	Bachelor: Business Systems	IT Support Assistant

BA IT, Bachelor of Information Technology; IT, information technology; BCom, Bachelor of Commerce; BEng, Bachelor of Engineering; SHEQ, Safety, Health, Environment, and Quality.

confirmability. The primary researcher was aware of her bias and influence in the research process through careful self-assessment as she collected, transcribed and analysed the data.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This method has been defined as a method that identifies analyses and reports patterns (also known as themes) from a collection of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In step 1 (familiarising oneself with the data), the data were reviewed. In this step, the transcripts and the notes taken during each interview were read and re-read. Step 2 involved generating initial codes using the ATLAS.ti software. The open coding method was used during the coding process, as there were no pre-set codes; however, codes were developed and modified as the transcripts were analysed during the coding process. Once the codes were created, code groups that further filtered the data were developed as the analysis continued. Step 3 involved searching for themes. Rough notes of the potential themes that were important in addressing the research objectives were made. In step 4, these themes were reviewed and evaluated to check if they fit well with the essence of the data and research objectives. Some themes were removed, and others were renamed to form a coherent pattern. Step 5 included defining and naming themes and unpacking the concepts and data linked to each theme.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) Research Ethics Committee (REC) on 30 August 2022. The ethical clearance code is No. IPPM-2022-690(M).

Results and discussion

A total of 130 codes, 15 code groups, four themes and 19 sub-themes were created from the thematic analysis. Table 2 illustrates the theme and sub-themes and the number of codes related or linked to each sub-theme. The themes were workplace transition, graduate identity and work identity.

Theme 1: Workplace transition

The workplace transition theme speaks to newcomers' various experiences as they transition to professionals. These include introduction to the workplace via graduate programmes, job responsibilities, expectations from employers, support and mentorship, alignment in values and how one adjusts and changes.

Workplace transition is a process where graduates navigate through the management of expectations about their first job (Monteiro et al., 2021).

Sub-theme 1.1: Graduate programme: Graduate programmes are well-structured programmes that run for 1–3 years. They aim to train and develop graduates by exposing them to practice in the study field (Bongers, 2020) instrumental to their careers (Nunez et al., 2022). The participants revealed that graduate programmes shaped and guided them in conducting themselves professionally. Furthermore, some participants revealed that the graduate programme had little influence on their professional development. Lynn Glassburn (2020) suggests that sometimes a mismatch between graduates' expectations and their actual work experience occurs.

Here are some of the participants' quotes regarding their experiences in the graduate programme:

> 'So the programme kind of gave us the basics and wherever now I go like moving forward, I know exactly what to expect and I know how to conduct myself appropriately and professionally.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

TABLE 2: Themes, sub-themes and the number of codes linked.

Themes	Sub-theme	#Codes linked
Workplace Transition	Graduate programme	88
	Job responsibilities	29
	Support and mentorship	42
	Adjustment and changes	177
	Graduate work expectations vs actual experience	58
	Lessons as newcomer	40
	Motivation to work	65
	Promotion or career growth prospects	70
Graduate Identity	Interest in career field	19
	Job-hunting and unemployment	55
	Effectiveness of work integrated programmes	98
Work Identity	Self image/personal identity	16
	Job-fit and value congruence	78
	Professional identity	101
	Developing work identity	96

vs, versus.

> 'Definitely has developed me professionally and also as a person. I got into the graduate programme, then during the week, I'm around people. I have a purpose now during the week.' (P7, 24, African , Female)

> 'The graduate programme came at the time that I didn't expect, right? Obviously, the financial freedom part where you like I'm earning a salary and I'm able to help out at home.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

> 'The graduate programme gave me direction for my career, but just the minimum.' (P10, 27, African , Male)

Sub-theme 1.2: Job responsibilities: Job responsibilities play a vital role in providing graduates in graduate programmes with an improved understanding of the study field and enhancing their skills and abilities (Jogan, 2019). Participants described their job responsibilities and their experiences of their work environment. The participants indicated that their job responsibilities needed to be more structured. This is affirmed by Fang et al. (2011), who state that graduates adjust better when they receive information and resources to clarify job responsibilities. Most graduates view increased responsibilities as a sign of career progression and an excellent opportunity to develop new skills (Nguyen et al., 2023). Here are two quotes from participants on their job responsibilities:

> 'So I guess what I learned here is as much as you have a job description, your responsibilities are 1234. But this is a company, at the end of the day, you are still needed here and there. So there are things that you are allowed to do and things that you're not allowed to do. So what happened is there was a time when basically I was forced, basically to almost do everything.' (P9, 28, African, Male, Diploma)

> 'Whatever that I do not understand, I ask. And whatever that I'm busy on, I make it a point that my boss knows what Im doing. And my boss knows how far I am with what I'm doing. And I do not sit and work alone the entire time. And I always go back to check that whatever that I am doing is still the same thing that they are expecting from me.' (P6, 25, African, Female)

Sub-theme 1.3: Support and mentorship: The support and mentorship sub-themes address the level of support graduates received from their organisations, colleagues and managers as they transitioned to professionals in the workplace. According to Smith et al. (2015), mentorship plays a role in developing work identity. Mentorship and support enhance the opportunity for the graduate-to-professional transition to be a meaningful experience (Zehr & Korte, 2020). Managerial support and mentorship are essential for providing graduates with role models, insights regarding workplace organisational culture and guidance that can lead to successful pathways (McDonald & Wilson-Mah, 2022). Participant 5 highlighted the fact that support made the 'transition a lot easier'. Managerial support reinforces work engagement and work-based identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Some of the participants' responses also confirmed this:

> 'Like in, in all the departments from the floor to the admin block. So I feel like the support that they gave me knowing that I'm still learning they were not hard on me. So I feel like they are support. It's the thing that made my transition a lot easier.' (P5, 24, African, Female, Diploma)

'The support that I received actually moulded me to become the person that I am and the person that I want to be. Because the minute I joined, I was welcomed. I knew what I had to do. They made everything a bit easier for me. The people that I was working with just told me what they expected from me and told me how to achieve what they expected for me.' (P3, 23, African, Male, Diploma)

Sub-theme 1.4: Adjustment and changes: This sub-theme unpacks quotes from participants who speak about changes they may have or have not encountered as they adjusted to their new roles. According to Smith et al. (2019), graduates generally feel more comfortable and confident with their job responsibilities at the end of a graduate programme. Some participants said the following regarding adjustments and changes related to the transition:

'I'm still in the process of adjusting. Surprisingly, I'm more responsible as an adult. I've started and I'm able to save money.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

'It has actually changed me as a person for the better. I am now an adult and I understand, you know, how things work now.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

'Going to bed early and my finances are the minor things that I had to adjust and to be financially independent, but with the lots of responsibilities. So yeah, and then to also work with more than 40 people, while you used to have maybe two or three people and now you have to work with so many personalities. And get to learn cultures, and you had to adjust from just being you and then now you are as a team.' (P6, 25, African, Female)

Sub-theme 1.5: Graduate work expectations vs. experience: This sub-theme unpacks the graduates' work expectations versus their actual experiences. Graduates tend to have high expectations regarding supervision, exposure to multiple aspects of the organisation, salaries and the permanent employment once the graduate programme is complete (Sauder et al., 2019).

Participants indicated they were exposed to work that they felt was not within their field. Here are some of the participants' quotes on work expectations:

'We would always be outside, maybe, like on-site as safety, health, environment and quality [SHEQ]. Being in the office, it's something that I didn't expect. It's something that was not even in my mind, like, what I thought about was like the scope of work that we are going to be exposed to.' (P5, 24, African, Female)

'So when we got here as graduates I thought people would give me tasks that are related to safety, health, environment and quality. But I was given tasks not related to my field and I would like to gladly do it. I never said, no this is not like part of my job description, or this is not part of like what I need. I did everything and anything that was given to me like I wasn't choosey. So, I started from the bottom then even I haven't climbed to the top.' (P8, 26, African, Female)

Sub-theme 1.6: Lessons and challenges as a newcomer: This sub-theme looked into the lessons and challenges graduates encountered as newcomers in the workplace. As newcomers to the workplace graduates begin to understand the nuances of work life (Rajamäki & Mikkola, 2021). The graduate-to-professional transition is underpinned by individuals successfully resolving challenges in the workplace and contradictions between their identity narratives (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

The participants shared that they learnt to perform challenging tasks and now have clarity on their career goals. Graduate programmes enhance graduates' confidence and responsibility and positively impact their career goals (Kapoor & Gardner-McCune, 2019). Furthermore, the participants suggested that as they got exposed to diverse cultures, people, personalities and outlooks, they learnt that people do not approach things the same way. Here are some of their responses on lessons learnt:

'I learned a lot. Actually, you know, meeting new people, you get to learn that not everyone is the same. You get to learn that how you'd approach someone, that's not necessarily how you'd approach everyone.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

'So I learnt that I should not doubt myself in a way, but whenever I'm doing, I have the potential and I should stop the self-doubt and stuff.' (P4, 24, African, Male)

'I've learned that, you know, as a person, you have to stand your ground. Definitely, you have to always take on every single challenge with so much grace, because that affects your mental health. Okay, never act out of emotions. I've learned that you have to be realistic and not have high expectations of a situation you've never been in.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

In terms of challenges, participants revealed that they struggled with adjusting to the pressure of work demands. Graduates struggle to balance the expectations of being independent, asserting their learning needs, advocating for themselves and managing setbacks (Hall & Liva, 2022). Here are some quotes regarding challenges:

'I guess the only challenge was that I was. I guess I was hard on myself. Because I went through things very quickly. I wanted basically to work rather than be a student and learn the work, be an intern. Yeah, I wanted to move beyond that.' (P9, 28, African, Male)

'I'm still out here trying to build my career to build my [*curriculum vitae*], but at the same time, I'm not getting fed, for my hunger, you know, so it was a bit frustrating for me because I want to learn but they're not giving me the equipment to do that for myself. You know, that was one challenge that I had to go through. I had to suck it up and go. You know, there was a point where I would hate waking up because I know I'm not gonna do anything there. I knew that at some point if I didn't show up for work, they were not really gonna notice.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

Sub-theme 1.7: Motivation to work: The most quoted work motivation factors were related to family, family background, self-motivation, finances, career and personal goals. Family and friends contribute significantly to balancing graduates' well-being and motivating them to overcome the challenges encountered during the transition work process (Monteiro et al., 2021). Here are some quotes from participants that support this sub-theme:

'So the failure element, the home situation, yourself wanting bigger things for yourself, everything just comes into play, listen there's a lot of people unemployed that really want this and you're just gonna give up based on 123. So, yeah, for me, that's just what kept me going.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

'Prayer, as soon as I feel overwhelmed, I go to the toilet to cry and pray. Then like that's when I get the strength to continue because I am overwhelmed here.' (P8, 26, African, Female)

'I can say it's my sister, my older sister. She's been supporting me throughout, my happy times and my sad times. She she's been there telling me that you need to push like you need to stand up for yourself.' (P5, 24, African, Female)

Sub-theme 1.8: Promotion and career growth prospects: Some participants had opportunities for promotion and career growth because of the graduate programmes. Growth opportunities significantly predict work identity (De Braine 2012; De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020). Some participants, on the other hand, experienced a lack of support and poor mentorship. Here are some quotes from participants that support this theme:

'I found myself being appointed as a junior accountant and I didn't think that opportunity would have opened for me. Now I see myself growing into a financial manager at some point.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

'Well, I'd say there are opportunities out there for me and not within my current organisation. I wanted to become a business analyst that yeah, that didn't come to fruition then ended up on the graduate programme as an IT graduate trainee.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

Theme 2: Graduate identity

This theme of graduate identity is displayed through the following sub-themes: graduates' interest in their career fields, unemployment, job-hunting, the effectiveness of work-integrated programmes and graduate work expectations. According to Holmes (2015), the concept of graduate identity speaks to the process of graduates developing an identity they present to employers in pursuit of employment.

Sub-theme 2.1: Interest in a career field: This sub-theme explores how these participants developed an interest in a specific career field. Some participants developed an early interest in a career field during their childhood and going to career fairs. Childhood contributes significantly to helping individuals find suitable careers as they grow older (Ayriza et al., 2020). Participants gave the following responses regarding this sub-theme:

'I have always loved anything to do with technology. Fast forward to high school, there was a career fair about tech, stuff about robots, and automation, and that's where I fell in love with IT. Yeah, that's when I decided to take subjects within the technology space. Then varsity came. And I think I knew what I wanted to study.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

'So after that science fair, I decided you know what, no, I want to do mechanical engineering because I was introduced I am lucky enough I met with this other guy he's an engineer and then he explained everything with what's happening in the engineering

industry and stuff. I was hooked from there. And then that's when I was like from grade seven, I am doing mechanical engineering.' (P4, 24, African, Male)

'I was good in accounting in high school, I got distinctions after distinctions. I enjoyed accounting so much. And I was like, what else can I do? I love accounting. Let me just get into accounting.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

Sub-theme 2.2: Job-hunting and unemployment: Job-hunting and unemployment as a sub-theme unpack the participants' experiences while seeking employment. Some participants indicated that they faced hardships when they were unemployed, and it took them almost two years to secure employment. They expressed that being unemployed affected their mental health and a sense of purpose. A few graduates engaged in alternative opportunities such as side hustles and promotions and pursued postgraduate studies. The transition from student to graduate newcomer seeking a job can be a difficult experience, leading graduate newcomers to feel anxious and negative emotions (Petruzziello et al., 2021).

Some quotes from participants reflecting on their job-hunting experience as unemployed graduates are highlighted further in the text:

'After getting my degree and stuff came job-hunting was the most stressful period ever because you have the certificate and everything, but you're not getting employed, and it was so stressful. So that thing stresses you.' (P4, 24, African, Male)

'So the graduate side was put aside and focused more on making money. Then when it hits that I can't sustain myself with this as the main stream of income, I'd have to get back into my qualification. That's when I started actively applying for what I studied for or anything in IT. And yeah, I guess yeah, the drive and the realisation that you have to make it and the only way to make an income besides side hustles was using my qualification, and that's what I did. And that's how I ended up getting into the graduate programme.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

'Unemployment, let's start there. So that was when COVID happened. Obviously, it was very hard to find a job. And I tried to do promotions and all that everywhere. And at some point, I just sat down and said, you know what, it wouldn't hurt just to do something that I've always wanted to do. You know, I've always wanted to have like a [*Doctor of Philosophy*] PhD. So that's, the first step is just let's just do the honours.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

Sub-theme 2.3: Effectiveness of work-integrated programmes: The sub-theme, effectiveness of work-integrated programmes, is centred on participants' feelings about such programmes. A work-integrated programme is a learning programme introduced to students integrating academics and exposure to practical workplace learning experiences (Ememe & Imo, 2022). A pre-placement preparation programme focusing on workplace relationships and scenarios that graduates might be exposed to and programmes addressing graduate well-being would be beneficial (Mandal & Edwards, 2022). Participants revealed that they felt underprepared for the workplace real issues and complexities. They also indicate that, in tertiary, they got some guidance,

such as creating a CV. Here are some quotes to support this sub-theme:

'Work-integrated programmes should begin in grade 10 high school because by the time you get to varsity. Yes, we have like work-integrated learning programs, but that doesn't. You still have to give 90% of the 10% that they give you. In as much as they tell you 10%, 90% of that has to come from you applying yourself and basically being hands-on.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

'I feel like in varsity there should be a course just to train us for work purposes like teach us how to transition from being a graduate to like being in a workspace because there are a lot of things that like we experience that like mentally we did not prepare ourselves for.' (P8, 26, African, Female)

Theme 3: Work identity

The theme, work identity, unpacks the sub-themes of self-image and personal identity, job fit and value congruence, professional identity and developing a work identity. Work experiences help to develop a work identity (Liljeholm & Bejerholm, 2020). Developing a work identity is driven by a collection of self-beliefs linked to an individual answering the question, who am I? in the workplace (Dalla Rosa et al., 2019).

Sub-theme 3.1: Self-image and/or personal identity: Participants revealed that their interaction with the workplace as graduates made them confident and grounded to the core of their identities. When newcomers transition from graduates to professionals, they firstly begin to establish themselves in the roles of their specific study fields while they try to understand their core identity in relation to their roles (Huff, 2019). Secondly, they begin the process of finding significance in their roles; they do so by 'privately grappling with insecurity in how they, as holistic individuals, enacted their identities in a professional setting' (Huff, 2019, p. 4). Participants 7 and 2 found that being in the workplace inspired them to want to hold on to certain parts of their identities. Participant 2 indicated that:

'When everything's against you, you still stay firm on what you believe in and you have your work to back it up. So that's how I view myself and identify in the corporate environment.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

Other participants gave the following responses when they were asked about personal identity as they transitioned to professionals in the graduate programme:

'So, it basically paved the way into how I want to see myself in the next five years, ten years.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

'I think it's very important basically as a young black female as well. When everything's against you, you still stay firm on what you believe in and you have your work to back it up. So that's how I view myself and identify in the corporate environment.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

'I don't want the profession that I'm in to change the kind of person that I am.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

'Because it has actually groomed me into the person that I am now, always a bit more vocal, who knows more than just finance, if I can put it like that.' (P3, 23, African, Male)

Sub-theme 3.2: Job-fit and value congruence: In terms of job fit, participants were asked to share their opinion on whether they felt that there was a fit or alignment between their personal attributes, such as knowledge, skills, preference and their jobs. Person-job fit is defined as 'the degree to which an individual's preferences, knowledge, skills, abilities (KSA), needs, and values match job requirements' (Brkich et al., 2002, p.1). Most participants shared that they experienced a fit between their jobs and themselves. Person–job fit is a sub-dimension of work identity (Bester, 2012). Person–job fit can influence employee performance, satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover and stress levels (Laschinger et al., 2016; Shah & Ayub, 2021).

Participants indicated the following regarding their view on person–job fit:

'And yeah, I just think it is now aligned to what I actually wanted because there's more exposure than what I anticipated before.' (P3, 23, African, Male)

'I was getting into this role, finding out what the role is about and seeing myself actually aligning with the role. I felt that the environment was perfect. The people were perfect. Like I aligned with them so easily.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

'And the field that I'm in requires a person who is able to solve problems. And I'm a problem solver myself. So being in this field is the right place for me. Because I am able to do everything as required of me. But again, I feel like I could be somewhere else.' (P9, 28, African, Male)

In terms of value congruence, the participants expressed that their values are aligned with the organisation and department. Value congruence is the deep-seated cognition that individuals experience when their values match the values of the organisation (Bester, 2012; Yu & Verma, 2019). Some participants felt they needed to relate better with their organisation.

Here are two quotes from participants on value congruence:

'The corporate culture in general. You know how people interact with each other. And I just feel like employees are the key to any organisation. If the team morale's down, if there's no motivation, if there's no, you know, working in harmony. Nothing is gonna go well. And yeah, that does not align with me. That's one of the top things that I look for when I come into any company.' (P2, 24, African, Female)

'I've had to like, assess who I am and whatever that is being offered, and how will it be aligning with my values.' (P1, 25, African, Female)

Sub-theme 3.3: Professional identity: Professional identity expresses how participants establish their identities as a professional within a profession. Professional identity in a broader sense is related to posing the characteristics of a profession, which encompasses the actions and activities of a profession (Fitzgerald, 2020). It is also a sub-dimension of work identity (De Braine, 2012). The process of forming a work identity is centred on how graduates first learn the foundational knowledge of their profession and then observe the professionals in their work environment (Janke et al., 2021). Participants indicated that their professional

identity was still forming as they navigated various work dynamics such as lack of support, promotion opportunities and job responsibilities. Participants indicated that the graduate programme shaped them professionally. Some participants indicated that the graduate programme was not aligned with their field of study.

The participants were quoted saying the following about their experiences as they began seeing themselves as professionals:

> 'Yes, it has grown, even though it's been, you know, a short period since, moving from the graduate into a professional space. Because now I'm a bit more independent than I was before. Not in the sense of working alone, but yeah, as an assistant, if I can put it like that. I was sort of being monitored and all of that and right now, it's not the same. It's not like that now they expect work that doesn't really need to be monitored.' (P3, 23, African, Male)

> 'Sometimes I feel like eish it's going to be a bit too much but with you know, constantly doing my work, you get to understand being a professional. It's not a big transition from whatever I was doing at school and everything.' (P4, 24, African, Male)

> 'So for now, in a nutshell, I would say I'm still developing my professional identity.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

Sub-theme 3.4: Developing work identity: The sub-theme, developing a work identity, reveals how the participants' work self-concept has been developed through their experiences within the workplace. Work identity has been defined as an individual's self-concept based on their understanding of a work role (Sulphey, 2020). The participants indicated that their work identity was still forming as they navigated the workplace as newcomers. Work identity is a social phenomenon; in other words, the negotiation of work identity happens as one interacts with others, often through collaboration (Gewirtz & Parett, 2021; Smith et al., 2015; Strack, 2020). Thus, graduates figure themselves out and find a way to do things. As a work identity forms, newcomers try to adapt to the profession (Moorhead, 2019).

The development of work identity is a non-linear process and is vital for organisations, as an individual's identity influences thoughts, feelings and actions in the workplace (Strack, 2020). This requires newcomers to synchronise and eventually harmonise their work experiences with their own identity (Lambert & Gray, 2020). Participants indicated that they found purpose in their work identity.

Participants said the following regarding the development of work identity:

> 'So, the whole identity for me, it's still being formed. So, at this instance, I wouldn't say I have. I'm still figuring out what my identity is as I navigate through the whole profession.' (P10, 27, African, Male)

> 'Being able to wake up every day with a purpose and knowing that this will get me somewhere.' (P7, 24, African, Female)

> 'There's a lot of things that I've adjusted from, hey. And yeah, and remember work, when you work, it's another life. That's what I've realised when I've been here. When you start working that when you start work, you are starting another life.' (P6, 25, African, Female)

In Figure 1, a visual representation of the graduate to professional: forming a work identity is presented.

This reflects the current study (Figure 1) which shows that graduates (with graduate identities) entering the workplace begin developing a work identity in Phase 1 when they join the organisation via a graduate programme. As they enter into Phase 2, they are exposed to the workplace via a graduate programme and other forms of experiences within the organisation, including mentorship, which influences growth and alignment. Graduate programmes are vital during the graduate-to-professional transition (Monteiro et al., 2021) and assist with personal and professional growth (Kapoor & Gardner-McCune, 2019), enhancing the level of professionalism (Hora et al., 2020). During this time, graduates negotiate with identities to figure out a good job fit. Transition happens as a graduate prepares 'oneself for the requirements of a new role or situation and incorporating the pivotal characteristics needed' (Minogue, 2019, p. 25). Organisational support and growth opportunities help to strengthen and enhance work identity (De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Growth and alignment happen in Phase 2, and it leads to a higher peaking or better development of work identities, culminating in a job fit, value congruence and a professional identity, as shown in Phase 3. Professional identity encompasses the actions and activities of a profession (Fitzgerald, 2020). Professional identity is also a sub-dimension of work identity (De Braine, 2012). A work identity is developed as graduates practically engage in work related to their study field and learn skills in relation to colleagues (Liljeholm & Bejerholm, 2020).

Implications for practice

Considering the role that graduate programmes play in graduates' transition in the workplace to professionals and in helping to develop work identities, it is recommended that organisations place more emphasis on these programmes as part of their talent management strategies. Talent management can be used as a tool to assist organisations in increasing and enhancing work identification (Barkhuizen & De Braine, 2021). Furthermore, South African organisations need to align their organisational policies and HR practices to strategically align with the organisational goals and strategies that aim to address the UN's two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are to *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* (SDG4) and to *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all* (SDG8). Human Resource business partners need to provide support to managers to ensure that all graduate programmes, skills development initiatives and all other functions are aligned with HR
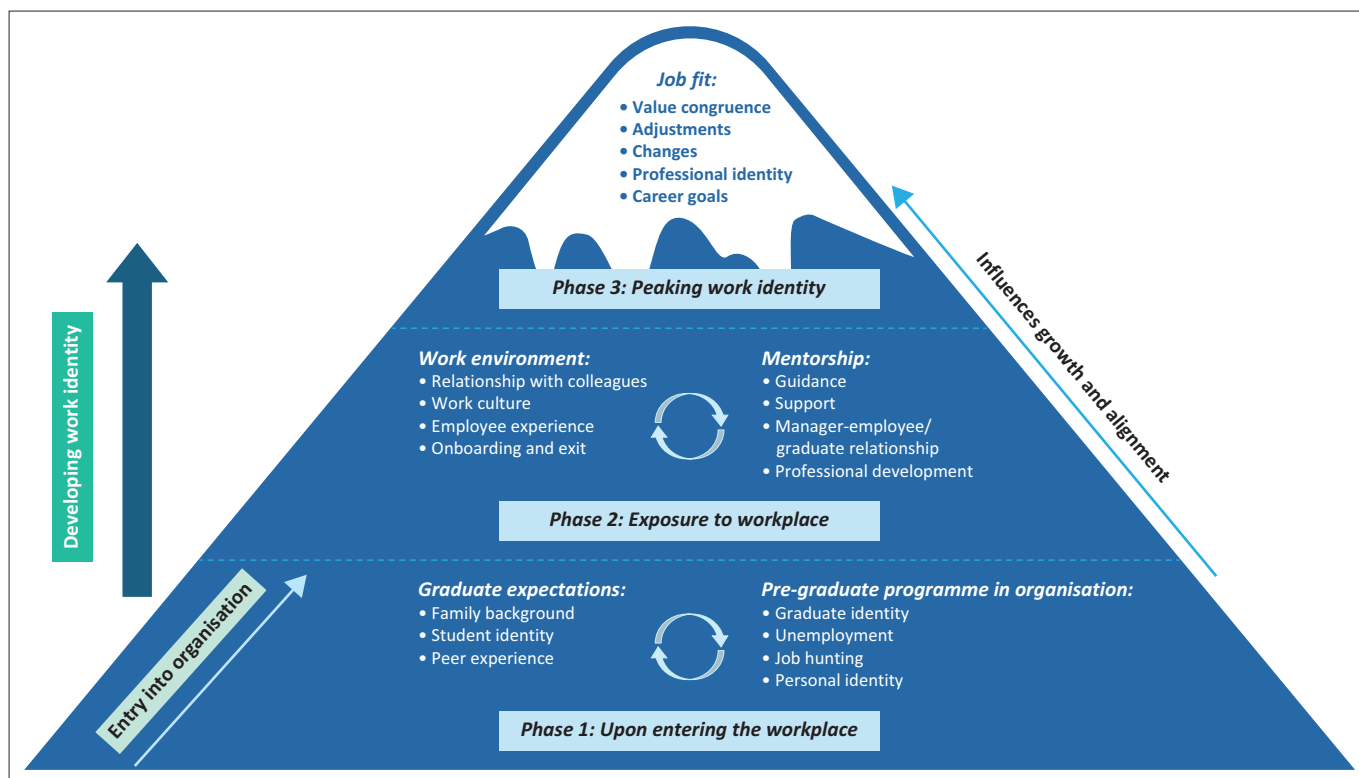
FIGURE 1: Graduate-to-professional: forming work identity.

strategic goals that aim to meet these two SDGs of skills development and decent work.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study is that there were only 10 participants, so the generalisability of the study cannot be made. Participants of this study were from only one ethnic group, that is African. It is recommended that future studies look into how different ethnic groups may respond to graduate programmes.

Recommendations for future research

Future research should consider including the perspective of mentors and managers who play the role of developing graduate newcomers in the workplace. According to Bongers (2020), managers directly see the graduate-to-professional transition as they work closely with the graduates. The perspective of a mentor and manager might provide insight into the tools and components required to support the better development of work identity in graduate newcomers. It is also recommended that future studies look into how the requirements of different professions influence the development of work identities.

Conclusion

Graduates developed a work identity as they interacted with colleagues and the organisation. As illustrated in Figure 1, a work identity forms as graduates transition between phases 1 and 3 of the graduate-to-professional transition. Graduate programmes facilitate the graduate-to-professional transition as such programmes expose graduates to the nuances of the workplace. The study provided a framework that highlights the key components enabling the graduate-to-professional transition and suggests the best way to maximise a developing work identity.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

L.M. conducted the study, collected the data, analysed the data and wrote the original draft of this article. R.T.D.B. supervised the research and contributed to the writing of this article.

Data availability

Research data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, R.T.D.B., upon reasonable request but will be subject to confidentiality and anonymity requirements.

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