AOSIS

The work role identity in flux of professional staff in a VUCA environment

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Orientation: Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) represents the environment in which business organisations operate, illuminated by the post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the recent advent of artificial intelligence (AI). The VUCA environment epitomises pervasive unpredictability, shaping the challenges faced by businesses.

Research purpose: This article focuses on the dynamics of individuals within private higher education institutions (PHEIs), driven by a bottom line; they compete to attract students, face greater scrutiny from outside constituencies and subjected to higher accountability. It explores the hierarchical structure of management levels and how the interrelatedness of the business environments can facilitate the navigation of the work role identity in flux in the face of constant change.

Motivation for the study: The fast-paced and ever-changing nature of today's business landscape significantly affects employees' core identities, as the constant need to adapt and perform at their best creates feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Consequently, it influences institutional and individual outcomes.

Research approach/design and method: This qualitative study collected data from qualified staff in senior-level positions within academia, with titles such as CEO or head of campus (HOC) ($N = 15$) at selected PHEIs. The data were analysed using ATLAS.ti.

Main findings: The findings show an extended framework highlighting elements vital to the increased institutional brand image and improved professional identity.

Practical/managerial implications: How individuals in the workplace experience and respond to constant unprecedented change affects the institutional brand and the role of management causes a significant influence.

Contribution/value-add: Leaders can drive organisations to adapt, change and evolve to the conditions of their organisational environment.

Keywords: work role identity; private higher education institutions (PHEIs); VUCA environment; unprecedented change; individual outcome.

Introduction

Professional staff deal with the wicked problem of unprecedented and constant change, disrupted by new technologies, such as the rise of 5G and a post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) workplace. The role of academic staff operating in a private higher education institution (PHEI) is no different. This ever-evolving work role complicates the individual value system, work identity and, consequently, the institution.

Globally, PHEIs are recognised as for-profit institutions focusing on the student, working harder, with fewer incentives, to improve the student experience.

Furthermore, in an endeavour to match and supersede competition, organisations in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment are compelled to do better by implementing innovative strategies (Millar et al., 2018). The artificial intelligence (AI) revolution ignited by ChatGPT in November 2022 marked a further pivotal moment, where traditional paradigms of teaching and learning underwent a radical shift, as educators and learners alike embraced the capabilities of ChatGPT.

Therefore, this article considers an organisation's dynamics in a VUCA environment, focusing on the individual, the employee, the management role and the institutional outcome.

VUCA was introduced during the Cold War and tended to relate more to the business context. However, the term has since been adapted to management and leadership contexts to represent the challenges leaders and organisations face, the complexities of globalisation and technological advancements, and the *rapidly* changing nature of the new World of Work (Coopersmith, 2021). Such a complex and dynamic professional context requires academic professionals to balance the business imperative, the academic nature of their business, and the services they provide, while maintaining a high standard of performance (Tankou epse Nukunah et al., 2019). Strategies and tactics for how leaders affect strategic change have been proposed. However, applying these strategies remains challenging in the VUCA environment, where multiple lenses are used to interpret information, make predictions or anticipate risks (Jooste & Frantz, 2017). Another way to view the uncertainty in VUCA has been proposed by Johansen (Di Bartolomeo, 2019). His conceptual framework, called the VUCA Positive Prime, translates VUCA as vision, understanding, clarity and adaptability (see Figure 1). For the purpose of this article, the VUCA framework framed the conversational interviews from the outset; the questions posed to participants covered their experiences in navigating and adapting to an environment characterised by perpetual change.

Given this ever-changing dynamic, academic leaders and the institution's leaders must change their approach. Navigating in a VUCA environment would demand that leaders not see it as a problem that can be resolved but as an ongoing dichotomy that must be effectively managed.

Furthermore, organisations need to move towards a more proactive response to change rather than simply reacting to change. Therefore, within the new World of Work in the VUCA context, the individual is frequently involved in sensemaking regarding their role and task (Du Plessis et al., 2022). This sensemaking process is related to adjusting their mindsets related to work roles and contributing to the mission of the educational institution, namely generating
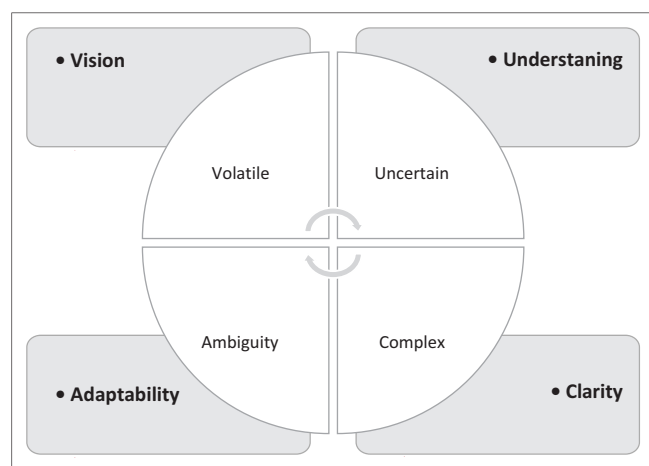
VUCA, volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.
FIGURE 1: The VUCA Positive Understanding.

knowledge and providing an educational experience that prepares students to meet societal needs (Degn, 2018; Sinclair & Webb, 2020). The academic has three tasks, namely, teaching, research and community engagement, which keep evolving because of the changes in the responsibilities and newly added roles, such as changes in platform teaching or change from face-to-face to online teaching or change from distance delivery to blended delivery, and as a result, the professional academic is involuntarily adjusting their identity (Cilliers, 2017).

It is not clear how individuals and institutions adapt to change in a VUCA environment and the resulting outcomes. Subsequently, the question is posed on how academics navigate their professional roles and the fluctuating nature of the work role identity amid the challenges posed by a VUCA environment.

Therefore, this article aims to explore the experiences of professional academic staff navigating frequent change and adjusting their professional identity to shifting parameters. To illustrate this point, perpetual parameter shifts can create a sense of instability, where employees may struggle to establish a consistent professional identity. As soon as they become accustomed to one set of parameters, the landscape changes again, requiring them to adjust and redefine their identity once more. This perpetual cycle of change can erode confidence and contribute to a heightened sense of uncertainty about one's professional identity (Cilliers, 2017).

This change is emphasised by Iwu et al. (2022), with examples that the academic must continuously respond to, which entails new work practices in communicating and collaborating via digital technologies, new routines, spatial adaptation, lifestyle adaptation, new skills development and self-management. Similarly, other factors constituting constant change include simple things, such as changing a template, designing a new template, online proctored examinations and learning new technological skills. Therefore, insights could shed light on the institutional and individual outcomes interfacing with the constantly changing environment and contribute to the design of meaningful workspaces by PHEI leadership. This can maximise the performance of skilled employees and academics in the middle of a chaotic world.

The institutional and individual outcomes for a PHEI undergoing constant change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are complex and multifaceted. The impacts will depend on various factors, including the nature and scope of the change, the readiness and capacity of the institution and its staff, and the overall context in which the change occurs.

This literature will highlight the most relevant topics related to the institution and the individual, unpacking the institution's brand identity and the academic's corresponding work role identity.

Literature review

The dynamics of the VUCA environment in the workplace

Private and public companies compete in an unpredictable, volatile climate. Under this scope, the reconstruction of the work identity is examined. Work identity has been shown to be a multidimensional work-based self-concept; it overlaps with the construct professional identity and is often used interchangeably reflecting an individual's self-image. It integrates organisational, occupational and other identities, shaping the roles and behaviours of individuals when they perform work (Popova-Nowak, 2009). The work identity of the individual employee is in flux, meaning it is in a constant state of modification (Adams & Crafford, 2012; Adler & Lalonde, 2020; Hurlimann et al., 2023). In higher education, an academic's work role identity is affected by constant change where they must continue to operate with optimal capacity and planning and scheduling within an 'un-ness': an uncertain, unplanned, unpredictable and unstable environment portrayed by VUCA.

The PHEI in the context of global higher education can accurately be described by VUCA, highlighting the complex, evolving and dynamic environment confronted by higher education (Waller et al., 2019). In South African private education institutions, (1) volatility refers to an increase in dimensions of change such as type, speed, volume and scale. For example, yet again, the academic is called to incorporate AI in their instructional design. (2) The uncertainty stems from volatility and results in difficulty predicting future events. For example, although chatbots and various digital applications are incorporated, HEIs are reported not ready to adopt AI-based chatbots. (3) Complexity results in widespread confusion with no clear connection between cause and effect affecting all organisations. (4) Ambiguity results from diverse meanings of surrounding conditions and the lack of precision (Michalon & Camacho-Zuñiga, 2023; Mohd Rahim et al., 2022; Sinha & Sinha, 2020). In this environment, there are benefits associated with considering any component of VUCA, including understanding the opportunities and threats inherent in the situation (Sthapit, 2020). Another consideration can be explained by referring to anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics or behaviours to nonhuman entities) (Wood, 2019) or, similarly, the 'fallacy of division'. A logical error is often made when one assumes that what is true for the whole is also true for its parts. This error occurs when referring to an institution doing well or undergoing change but then neglects to acknowledge the potential disparate effects on individual employees or staff members. Therefore, the management sciences refer to the institution as a social institution, where people are the lifeblood of an organisation, acting as knowledge workers at the centre of success for the institution, and from there, the need to understand the institutional and individual outcome and how individuals function and navigate constant change (Hellriegel et al., 2022).

This article focuses on the professional staff members because how they experience unprecedented change has a consequent outcome on themselves and the institution. Challenges resulting from change are not new, but post-COVID-19 has flagged an urgency in the timeframe to transition and adjust to change (Iwu et al., 2022). These challenges will lead to stress and fatigue, as academics must balance an already changing workload (Kenny & Fluck, 2014; Apostolidis et al., 2022) and cope with new changes and skills needed to adapt to their new role (Kenny & Fluck, 2018). One typical challenge experienced by academics in the PHEI includes more time and freedom to explore innovative ideas and to be able to take leave to do quality research, which Tiwari (2017) claims is not prioritised in the private context. In addition, in responding to these challenges, the academic needs management support and constant consultation with management to adjust to the new role (Beaton, 2021; Warren, 2010).

Therefore, the next sections will follow and interpret the concepts of individual and institutional outcomes and their interface with the support of management (the leadership of the institution), which subsequently impacts the work identity of the professional staff member.

Individual

Each professional responds differently to change, especially if it is signified by a short timeframe to transition (Veldsman & Veldsman, 2020). Whatever happens to the individual in the workplace could either lead to a state of burnout and stress, confusion or a lack of direction, or a state of self-development and adaptability or reflection. Individuals will either be innovative and create new processes or fail to do so and fall back into the traditional way of working (Chetty & Pather, 2016; Shankar et al., 2021). Identity theory shows that individual behaviours are influenced by identity hierarchies (Cable & Welbourne, 1994). These authors assert that events can have various meanings and elicit multiple reactions depending on an individual's unique hierarchy. For example, identity theory might predict an academic staff member's response to an added workload, be it extra research output, additional hours to teach or changing teaching platforms. If the academic has a hierarchy with a dominant research role, the theory suggests that this academic might improve research output. On the other hand, if the hierarchy reflects a dominant teaching role, the theory predicts the academic will not be successful in research output and will find themselves experiencing tension in the identity work, continuously trying to balance the research and teaching expectations (Barnard, 2019).

As a result of the managerial and structural changes in higher education, Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) concluded that academic identities have become increasingly diversified and polarised. Moreover, while academics constantly improve and cope with constant change, they must continuously consult about workload, which is not always possible (Du Plessis, 2023; Jengwa & Pellissier, 2022). The transitioning process is instrumental to the identity reconstruction process (Flottau, 2017; Kivimaa et al., 2021; Thanaraj, 2016).

The following section covers concepts about the private institution and its closeness in operating as a business informed by business principles.

Institution

Because of the VUCA environment of the workplace, the institution must remain adaptable and responsive to change, which may require ongoing modifications to its operations and strategies. Therefore, while progress has been made in adapting to the changing higher education landscape, the institution must continue to be vigilant and flexible to meet the needs of its students and staff in the years to come (Hedding et al., 2020). The individual's ability to adjust and be resilient to change is affected if the institution is not resilient or reluctant to change (Rees et al., 2015).

Notably, students are commonly designated as customers in the context of private higher institutions, underscoring the necessity of prioritising the students' needs throughout any change process and aligning the academic identity formation process accordingly. Another essential consideration is the generation gap between academics and students of Generation Z. The history since 1994 indicates the array of transformation-oriented initiatives seeking to effect institutional change. Changes are evident in the definition of the purposes and goals of higher education; funding, academic structure and programmes, and quality assurance; enacting of new laws and regulations; major restructuring and reconfiguring of the higher education institutions; discussions linked to neoliberalism and decolonisation, andragogy and heutagogy; and new entrants into academic institutions and the related generational divide in the academic profession (Kwiek 2017; Sabelis, 2020). In this context, Baack et al. (2016) contend that educational institutions that are growing in size will decentralise decision-making authority abruptly or at a revolutionary pace because of pressures for change.

Private higher education institution hierarchy

Top management in the managerial hierarchy drives the vision of the institution. Their role is significant in offering support and guidance and driving innovation for the academic institution (Aronsson et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Atibuni (2019) and Maddock (2023) indicate that the academic staff member in private institutions acts as the middle manager or middle-level academic leader. In this context, management is confronted with a paradox regarding the autonomy of academics operating on the middle level. In theory, responsibility and accountability to make and control decision-making are with the academic; however, the academic is still managed by higher-level management or institutional leadership, which limits the academic's autonomy.

With new changes or challenges, it is important to establish or consult a new contract or discuss the new workflow process. This is not always happening because of the fast turnaround time between adjusting to change because of the VUCA environment (Jones et al., 2012). Furthermore, the hierarchy in the PHEI is fundamental to consider in this context. The hierarchical structure in the private institution in this study refers to the institution's leadership and the participants, who are academics acting as senior management and middle managers. For the current study, it was critical to understand how academics act as leaders and how they can connect to institutional leadership in times of crisis to ensure a coordinated institutional and academic response (Woiceshyn et al., 2022). Therefore, the institution's hierarchy has a significant impact, and academics may shift from being pure academics to becoming managers or heads of schools, causing their roles to change constantly (Ivetić & Ilić, 2020). To reiterate constant change, within multiple contexts, the academic role is evolving because of change from all avenues, pressuring the academic role and ultimately impacting the professional work identity (Martin et al., 2020). For instance, an academic may be promoted to executive director and experience different responsibilities and duties compared to when they were a senior academic (Barbato et al., 2019).

It became integral to interview seasoned academics and find an in-depth understanding of how they navigate the VUCA environment.

Research approach

A qualitative approach was applied (Schurink et al. 2021) to study the phenomenon of the academic work role identity reconstruction process because of constant change and alignment to constantly shifting parameters to work within.

The design followed an instrumental case study, where cases were chosen because they are considered typical of professionals or, in this instance, academics encountering unprecedented change in private academic institutions. The research philosophy of a constructivist interpretivist acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed and influenced by individual experiences and perspectives, thus guiding the researcher to explore the subjective experiences of professional academics and their construction of reality to gain a deeper understanding of human experience and perception (Roberts, 2020).

Research setting and sampling

Besides being employed at a private institution, the demographic characteristics of the sample of interviewees included other criteria. Firstly, participants needed to represent at least one of the several business disciplines (including operations management, marketing, critical thinking, economics, finance, management policing and law enforcement), indicated in Table 1 of demographics, teaching discipline. Secondly, have experience in the distance learning delivery mode, contending with everyday processes of change (such as rebranding, restructuring and changing business models in the quest to keep up with

TABLE 1: Demographics of study participants (N = 15).

Category	Position and roles	Number	Total
Level in institution	Senior level	8	15
	Middle level	7	-
Title	Senior academic*	4	15
	Prof	3	-
	Dr	7	-
	Consultant (PHE)	1	-
Age (years)	40–50	2	15
	50–60	8	-
	60–70	5	-
Years' experience in PHE	3–15	5	15
	15–20	9	-
	20–30	1	-
Other roles	CEO	-	-
	HOC	-	-
	SL	-	-
	PM	-	-
	Supervisor	-	-
	Facilitator	-	-
	Trainer	-	-
	Moderator	-	-
	HOD	-	-
	HOS	-	-
	Tutor	-	-
	Liaison	-	-
	Consultant	-	-
Teaching discipline	Entrepreneurship	1	-
	Marketing	1	-
	Innovation	1	-
	Leadership and management	5	-
	Political science	1	-
	Project management	2	-
	Research	3	-
	Safety and security	3	-
	Critical thinking	1	-
	History	1	-
	Public finance management	1	-
	Economics	3	23

PHE, private higher education; CEO, chief executive officer; HOC, head of campus; SL, senior lecturer; PM, programme manager; HOD, head of department; HOS, head of school.

*, The reference to the titles Senior Academic and Professor is mostly distinguished by significant experience and expertise in their field in academia and scholarly contributions.

industry demands and stay competitive, with the constant focus to make a profit and not only to be traditional educators in higher education). Naturally, each academic had to transition back and forth between remote teaching and online teaching and adapt to the new World of Work as a result of COVID-19, incorporating various strategies to align with institutional goals and the new needs of a changing student cohort.

There were more male participants (11) than female participants (4), and the age range was 40–70 years, which was one of the study's inclusion criteria to glean information from seasoned academics.

Instrumental in this research study was STADIO, one of the PHEIs that served as the initial institution to gather information from seasoned academics. STADIO offers over 90 accredited programmes to over 30 000 students. This institution had undergone a major restructuring and,

in this process, was listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) (Stadio Higher Education).

Instrumental case research utilises a specific case to enhance the comprehension of broader phenomena. In this study, private higher education (PHE) providers have a crucial role in enriching and expanding the education system's capacity, contributing to skill and knowledge development, and enabling learning across the various study fields represented in the sector. According to the statistics of Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 123 types of private institutions, contact, distance and blended, are registered and accredited. It was reported in 2021 that 232 915 students enrolled in PHEIs, offering various courses from Engineering to IT to Design and Art, Education and Theology (*Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa* 2023).

In stark contrast, the public institutions in South Africa portrayed an extremely different number of enrolments, that of 1 068 046.

Measuring instrument

An interview schedule was applied, and an 'informal conversation' type of qualitative interview (Turner, 2010) contained a list of questions and topic areas. The interviewee was encouraged to participate in a conversation and share experiences. Interview questions (IQs) addressed the continuous change academics contend with, the implications to their academic identity, how lenient academics view themselves to adapt to change, and how agile and ready they perceive the institution to adapt to these changes.

Data gathering

For this study, private accredited distance learning institutions specialising in Business and Commerce studies (12 sites) in Gauteng were identified and targeted to be included (*Register of Private Higher Education Institutions*, 2021). A convenient and purposive sample was drawn consisting of 15 seasoned academics at PHEIs until saturation was achieved (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Semi-structured interviews focused on academics' perceptions, responses and experiences within a constantly changing environment affecting the academic role. The semi-structured interview was suitable for this study as the information gained from the interviewees assisted in understanding the VUCA world as the participants see it and their perception of the current academic role, and it highlighted the specific issues to be presented in the framework of the VUCA environment and the work role identity (Bell et al., 2021).

Data analysis

Each interview was labelled according to the participant's designation and the interview number in the order in which the interviews were scheduled, gender and years of experience in PHE. HOC 12 is the head of campus and was

the 12th participant to be interviewed, a male with 18 years of experience; CEO 11 is a chief executive officer and was the 11th participant, male, with 5 years of experience. SL included the senior lecturers.

The first step after the interviews to obtain the experiences among academics was the grouping of relevant statements and quotes from interviews that explained the interviewees' responses and viewpoints. Table 2 and Table 3 show the main findings derived from the two research objectives and themes that emerged from the illustrative quotes from interviews and subsequent subcodes.

Thematic analysis was applied, identifying concepts for further analysis. The analysis process started with line-by-line coding of each transcribed interview (Thompson, 2022). Phenomena/constructs were identified and defined to create groups and categories, and then *interconnections* between extracts of the interviews were made to enable the formation of subcodes and the generation of themes (Schurink et al., 2021). ATLAS.ti

software was used during the text analysis and evaluation of the interviews, creating concepts related to the outcomes. Analysis was aligned with the research objectives:

1. To investigate the individual outcome because of changing academic role identities.
2. To explain institutional outcomes because of changing academic role identities.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (Ethics code: 202202-Doctor of Management student number). Institutional permission was obtained, and informed consent was provided by participants. Ethical considerations relating to the use of interviews as a data collection method were upheld and included minimising the risk of unanticipated harm, protecting the information pertaining to interviewees, effectively informing interviewees about the nature of the study, and preventing the risk of exploitation.

TABLE 2: Self-centred vertical leadership development.

Subcodes	Illustrative extracts from interview
IQ: How do you view the new role identity of the academic?	
Adaptability	'Depending on the appetite, some are scared of change and not willing to go there. But my interpretation is always the average academic is open to new ideas because we read a lot and speak to a lot of people. So in terms of subject content, you know, change is natural, and in terms of processes falling back in the comfort zone, that's where they struggle.' (CEO 8, male, 12 years experience)
Complex workload	'I have the additional administrative responsibilities and so on and so forth that come with it.' (HOC 3, male, 20 years experience)
	'You have to be adaptable and well prepared and just be able to adapt right away. You must be well prepared; nothing should be able to bring you off your game, and the show must go on.' (HOC 2, male, 18 years experience)
	'Learner support is a lot of things. It can be financial assistance. It can be academic assistance. It can be administrative assistance; all those things fall under the learner support.' (SL 4, male, 18 years experience)
Continuous improvement	'The academics in the private sector must become leaders, in developing theories, in writing books, in coming up with practices and technology for us to be able to understand that our work has changed.' (HOC 12, male, 18 years of experience)
	'I've also flopped with stuff, on Google, there's the online Jam board tool, but a student said he is blind but attended to better understand, but now he can't follow. Then we don't Jam board anymore, and it's part of VUCA to be adaptable, and you experiment with one thing, and if it doesn't work, then you're trying something else.' (HOC 2, male, 18 years experience)
Self-development	'So if you want to educate yourself (autonomy) and be on top of your game with the latest technology and you have to attend webinars and those things, sometimes you have to get up at 2:00 o'clock in the morning at 10 to join for an hour. So you just have to because we are living in a global village.' (HOC 2, male, 18 years experience)
Horizontal leadership development	'So you must have the bottom-up, horizontal level, and peer-to-peer change management, where people are actually sharing the best practice, service and understand. You know that it can be a positive experience and can be well-managed.' (CEO 8, male, 12 years experience)
	'It would be to have a definitive which is one of the strategies in your staff development strategy. Provision should be made, resource wise, time wise. Maybe have workshops other developmental interventions, to expose the academics to these things, and if it's not the expertise internally to do that, then get the expertise externally.' (Dr 10, male, 15 years experience)

TABLE 3: Institutional autonomy.

Subcodes	Illustrative extract from interview
IQ: How agile and ready is the institution to adapt to unprecedented change?	
Psychological support consultation process (contracting when processes and responsibilities change)	'That is a huge psychological burden. That is where there must be more support from management in an institution. The psychological support. Finances are one thing, but more important is that psychological support.' (SL 14, male, 18 years experience)
	'Today, this is the objective. And then make sure in that process, there's a joint agreement on the route and the steps to get there.' (CEO 8, male, 12 years experience)
Hierarchical structure	'So I've got about 3 bosses simultaneously, and the one wants research and, the other one wants operations, and the other one wants content. But that comes back to the hierarchy, and that comes back to the whole teaching philosophy and what we do, and research does not bring in money. Not for privates, but they want us to do it because they want the esteem. But not willing to pay for it. And then, on some level, they say no, we don't want to appoint people just to do research, which is the obvious thing that you want for privates.' (HOC 7, male, 4 years experience)
	'We have management on the one side, and we have academia on the other side. And, sometimes, you find that it appears as if it's two worlds, two organisations, but it's actually all in silos.' (SL 14, male, 18 years experience)
	'I'm very comfortable with a contract as a part-time staff member. I work part-time, full-time, or you can sign a contract for the next three years.' (CEO 8, male, 12 years experience)
Support	'Where in any business context will you be expected to do extra work but not contracted for that?' (SL 5, male, 11 years experience)
	'Where the change is initiated, from there should be clear guidance and processes to guide the academics.' (CEO 8, male, 12 years experience)
Private education institution	'I think on the individual level, the chances that as a private higher education academic can actually become a scholar is close to zero because you wear so many hats.' (HOC 1, male, 15 years experience)
	'In many instances, private institutions are leading as far as technology because the academics are in the situation to create this kind of technology. So private institutions are at an advantage. They are free to experiment and respond to the needs of the communities where they're operating.' (HOC 12, male, 18 years experience)
	'I would like to believe that in the ideal world, we should think differently. Moving into the new world of work, we must make peace with the fact that, as a private, we don't have the luxury for somebody to have a full-time job contingent on a program.' (CEO 11, male, 5 years experience)

Results and discussion

Interviewees were posed with the IQ of their view of the new work role identity of the academic. From the responses presented by the participants, subcodes emerged from the data collected and Table 2 was constructed.

Research objective 1: To explain the individual outcome because of changing academic role identities

As experienced academics, the participants demonstrate a propensity to cultivate self-reliance, therefore engaging with self-development rather than depending solely on the backing of institutional management or leadership.

The professional individual who must deal with constant change must adapt their work. Although it is a process that is currently happening overnight, the traditional transitioning stage normally happens over a long period (Glassburn, 2020). As CEO 8 has related, it is not always that easy for academics to accept and create new innovative ideas amid change, but rather follow the traditional way of work (Kivimaa et al., 2021):

> 'You have to look at that experience that you have had with these things to draw on that and to plan around it so that at least there are plans A, B and C in place.' (HOC 3, male, 20 years of experience, DBA)

Self-centred vertical leadership is grounded on the concept of vertical development of role identity and is related to vertical leadership development. These concepts expand an individual's thinking capacity and ability to manage change (Petrie, 2014), positioning it as a unique approach to helping leaders and organisations navigate the VUCA environment.

It is up to the individual to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic and similar crises, and whether the professional staff member responds positively or negatively can affect society and the workplace. Depending on your ability and view of change, you will be able to adapt and show resilience, flexibility and creativity in the face of adversity (Clyde & Corpuz, 2021). Furthermore, the academic's adaptive processes in response to frequent change relate to their resilience to change (Bento et al., 2021).

The phenomenon of self-regulation or self-development occurs in this instance in the absence of management support or lack thereof during the volatile constant change in the institution. Although CEO 8 advocates for peer-to-peer change management at a horizontal level, fostering a well-structured change experience has shown to be a very challenging process during times of sudden change or frequent disruptions in the workflow process.

This transitional phase of change unavoidably compels academics to engage in a continuous improvement process or navigate through a trial-and-error scenario, particularly as

they have to adjust to new changes and create innovative approaches within this changing context. HOC 2 emphasises that such circumstances are inherent to a volatile workplace environment. In the absence of managerial or colleague support, academics must adapt to the most effective strategies that serve the best interests of the students and the institution.

This aligns with what Bothma et al. (2015) suggested: the identity formation process also leads to behavioural and cognitive outcomes, and they also practise reflection (Faller et al., 2020; Wain, 2017).

Academics learn to be agile because of the challenges presented to them; if successful or not, they can learn and grow from the experience. Any form of setback, failure or misinterpretation can serve as valuable learning opportunities, enabling academics to refine their skills and knowledge, ultimately enhancing their ability to perform the task more effectively in subsequent endeavours.

Continuous improvement happens in tandem with personal development and is considered an ongoing process rather than a singular event, where the emphasis is on continuous growth and self-improvement. This process of ongoing growth is reflected in vertical leadership (Coopersmith, 2021). Therefore, it is important to think more broadly about the academic or workplace development project (Sutherland, 2018), especially during *times of* frequent disruption and subsequent continuous change.

The following section of interviewees' responses relates to the agility of the *institution* and readiness to adapt to change.

Research objective 2: To explain institutional outcomes because of changing academic role identities

It is not business as usual for business professionals post-COVID-19 (Hedding et al., 2020).

Furthermore, leadership positions within higher education are frequently filled with scholars lacking leadership skills and experience, which can be detrimental both to their performance and well-being. Findings have suggested that their notions of leadership and any developmental needs or activities are perceived as useful according to their leadership level (Cronje & Bitzer, 2019).

Participants HOC 7 and HOC 1 believe that in a private institution, because of the complicated role of the academic, sharing focus in being a teacher and manager, the focus is divided and becoming a scholar is exceedingly challenging.

Nevertheless, HOC 12 presents a contrasting perspective by asserting that academics in private education enjoy a notable advantage, characterised by enhanced autonomy and capacity, in exploring novel domains and disseminating such knowledge to the academic community, with fewer constraints from government regulations. They possess a

distinctive advantage in assuming the role of pioneers and frontrunners in the field of technology, but this is not the case because of the VUCA environment:

'In many instances, private institutions are leading as far as technology because the academics are in the situation to create this kind of technology. So private institutions are at an advantage. They are free to experiment and respond to the needs of the communities where they're operating.' (HOC 12, male, 18 years of experience, PHD History)

But then CEO 8 challenges this by encouraging the academic to think differently and not accept the situation as it is presented. However, academics should challenge themselves and acknowledge that the structure of a private institution makes it complex:

'Where the change is initiated from, there should be clear guidance and processes to guide the academics.' (CEO 8, male, 12 years of experience, DCom Marketing)

The results showed that the middle-level employee working in an institution, presenting the employment brand, has the same challenges as institutional leaders (management) who must simultaneously contend with the new change and the managing of employees and that a void exists during this time of the transitioning process in the line of communication (Cronje & Bitzer, 2019; Keepling et al., 2007).

The participants unanimously responded that support from management constitutes a significant challenge. The absence of clear guidance, unambiguous protocols, effective consultation once unplanned change occurs, and collaboration further compounds the situation. Furthermore, the lack of a defined support structure exacerbates the predicament, rendering it difficult for individuals to ascertain the appropriate sources of support (Rodriquez, 2020).

Besides the bottom line, the ultimate goal of an institution is to increase sustainability, agility, innovation, competitiveness and the employer brand (Doyle & Brady, 2018). Therefore, the outcome reflects how this vision is communicated, consulted, negotiated and promoted with the employees during change.

If all these aspects are considered, a professional academic undergoes an identity formation process or engages in identity sensemaking. Additionally, it is important to consider the psychological impact of navigating a challenging and unpredictable work environment for the individual (Gioia & Thomas, 2016):

'That is a huge psychological burden. That is where there must be more support from management in an institution. The psychological support. Finances are one thing, but more important is that psychological support.' (SL 14, male, 18 years of experience, M.Admin)

There is a considerable degree of interplay or overlap between the corporate (institutional) identity, the professional identity and the role of management, causing salient and dormant identity effects (Cilliers & Henning, 2021). Furthermore, the academic's focus on achieving personally and institutionally positive outcomes is crucial:

'Sharing decision-making and communicating through the top-down and bottom-up approaches is very important, which could make a significant difference in gaining buy-in from everyone involved. But this process is not commonly followed in a PHEI context.' (SL 5, male, 11 years experience, MCom)

Based on the preceding discussion, the framework presented in Figure 2 illustrates the interrelated environments forming the VUCA environment influencing the professional individual.

Discussion of the framework of the VUCA environment and work role identity in flux

VUCA environment

Both individuals and institutions operate within the volatile boundaries of a VUCA environment.

The significant economic and institutional disruptions mounted from this environment pressurise institutions to take on this change, because if they do not, they will be unable to keep up with regulations, competition, globalisation, and industry trends and consequently will have to exit the market (Hunt & Boliver, 2021; Richardson et al., 2017).

Work role identity

Institutional change comprises the transformational role of the academic dealing with constraints and enablements. It causes the process of the reconstruction of the work role identity (Clayton & De Braine, 2023). Figure 2 lists standardised processes, line of authority, contractual duties and collective collaboration under the role of leadership, causing challenges and uncertainties in the transitioning process for the academic who has to operate at full capacity in the new World of Work. What contributes another layer to the constraints listed is a lack of time – lack of time to negotiate clear guidelines and procedures to follow or discuss contractual changes, ambiguity regarding lines of authority, limited time for reflection and insufficient opportunities for collaboration.

Individual outcomes improve

There is some consensus that academic identity is reconstructed by participating in an iterative process of interpreting and reinterpreting experiences (Degn, 2018; Martin et al., 2020). This causes a challenging alchemic (which is not always acknowledged or assigned sufficient time) sensemaking process for the academic, including emotional and cognitive efforts (Cilliers, 2017).

Because of the volatility of the VUCA environment, the academic individual is inclined to adapt to a perpetual state
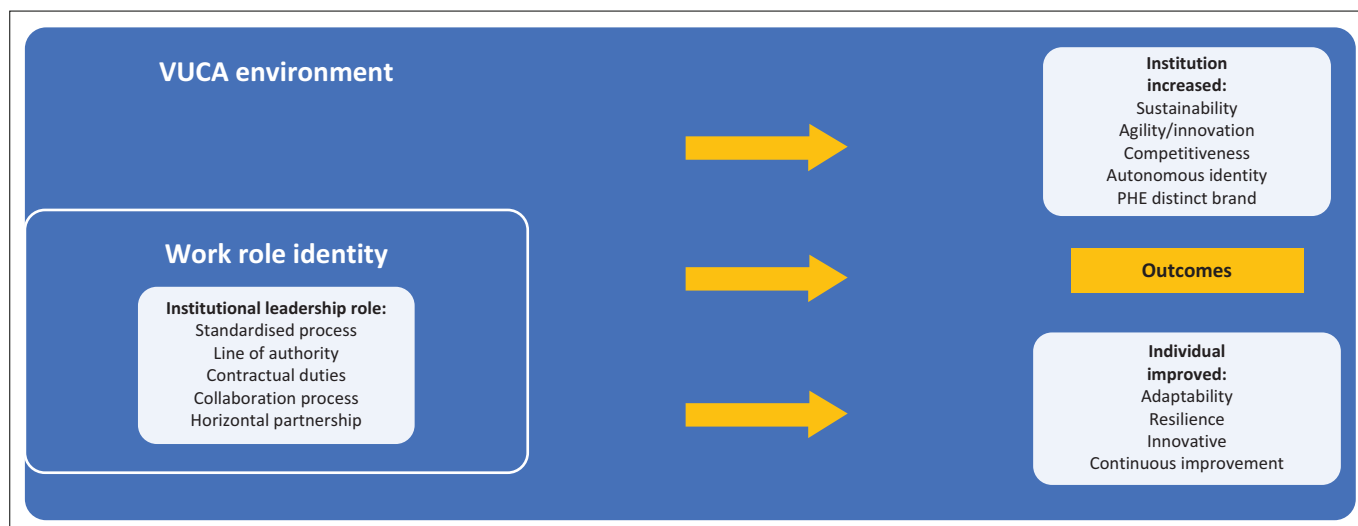
FIGURE 2: Framework of the VUCA environment and work role identity in flux.

of self-development. But the key to this development process is the implication of the pressures and constraints that are amid it all (as indicated in Figure 2, the work role identity is in flux) affecting the academic individual outcome (adaptability, resilience, initiative) and, subsequently, the institutional outcome (competitiveness, PHE distinct brand identity).

Institutional outcomes increase

There is a considerable degree of interplay or overlap between the corporate (institutional) identity, the professional identity and the role of management, while it is also necessary to consider the most important player, the client. In a fluctuating external environment, more duties are assigned to the tertiary institution and, as a result, transferred to their academics. Management expertise is needed to solve the problem of higher requirements for the heads of faculties in terms of distribution of resources, responsibility for personnel and finances. Until now, the heads of departments did not necessarily have this proficiency (Hagerer, 2016).

The critical role of the leadership of the institution should be focused on, as the environmental forces change, and the work role identity of academics.

In contemporary dynamics, there has been a notable shift in the roles played within academic institutions. Traditionally, external elements, such as regulatory bodies or market forces were primarily responsible for exerting pressure on the institution, driving the need for adaptation and improvement. However, a paradigm shift has occurred, wherein the academics within the institution now also play a significant role in exerting pressure.

This newfound influence of academics stems from the realisation that the success and progress of the institution are intrinsically linked to the development and empowerment of its academic members. By providing ample support and

guidance to academics and fostering a collaborative environment that encourages the sharing of knowledge and the pursuit of innovative strategies, the institution stands to flourish.

The crux of this transformed approach lies in recognising the symbiotic relationship between the institution and its academics, and that will create a distinct brand identity (Bird & Mugobo, 2021). Therefore, this collaborative synergy between academics and the institution will yield a powerful force that drives the organisation forward.

In conclusion, the reversal of roles, with academics exerting pressure on the institutional leadership, represents a positive shift towards a more cohesive and mutually beneficial approach. By nurturing academics and fostering collaborative efforts, academic institutions can thrive and successfully navigate the challenges of a rapidly evolving academic landscape.

Strategies to ensure the quality and rigour of the research design

Obtaining trustworthiness and reaching saturation have become the critical components of validating qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The concepts of *transferability*, *dependability*, *confirmability* and *credibility* as dimensions of credible qualitative research were applied. One of the strategies included *synthesis* as part of the analysis process to condense the concepts and align them to the context of the study and IQs. Furthermore, the use of the software, ATLAS.ti, enabled 'code checking' in relation to groundedness and density.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

It is essential to acknowledge several limitations that may affect the generalisability and depth of the findings. Firstly, the study's scope was restricted to a select number of PHEIs, and a sample size of $N = 15$, potentially limiting

the transferability. Secondly, the unique characteristics and organisational cultures of these institutions may have influenced the experiences of participants in ways that differ from those in public or nonprofit institutions (Khaw et al., 2022). Lastly, the qualitative nature of the study inherently limits the ability to make causal inferences to broader populations. Future research utilising quantitative methods could complement these findings by providing broader statistical analyses and comparative assessments across different institutional settings.

Conclusion

The findings showed that academics had to contend with immense adaptations and adjustments in a short period of time, for example, institutional changes such as adopting new processes, technologies, structural changes, and modifications to reporting structures. This complication is mainly because of the time constraints that academics have to operate at optimal capacity and significantly constrain the transitioning process for academic staff.

The study contributed to nuances of business, psychological and organisational literature (McGonagle et al., 2022; Rees et al., 2015). Within PHEIs, seasoned academic staff members are developing a new work role identity based on underlying dimensions of radical transformation, transition management and autonomous rapid self-regulation within a continuously changing workplace environment.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

B.K. conducted the study as part of the doctoral studies and final article writing, with N.B. as the supervisor.

Funding information

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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