FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: A POSTMODERN EXPLORATION OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Volume 1 of 2: Thesis and References

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December, 2024

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Abstract

As higher education evolves, and league tables dominate conversations, the professional development of academic staff is both essential and complex. It could be the pathway to improving how the university functions, enhancing the research generated, and evolving teaching practices for increased student advantage. This thesis takes the opportunity to critique professional development through a postmodern lens and to understand and celebrate diverse, context-specific staff realities. Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the lived experience of academic staff will be examined, with a focus on addressing power dynamics, personal agency, and institutional pressures. It is considered here how professional growth is dynamically negotiated, whilst battling with institutional demands, individual aspirations, and shifting professional identities. Through in-depth interviews, using the Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship as a guide, the study explores the tensions between teaching, research, and engagement, as well as the impact of external frameworks like REF or TEF on academic identity and agency. This research challenges traditional linear models of growth, presenting instead a fluid and fragmented view of professional development in line with postmodern ideals. By reframing professional growth as ongoing, reflective and contextual, this study invites higher educational professionals to shift from prescriptive frameworks to approaches that honour individual agency. Here, we suggest that professional development, within the College of Business and Social Science (Aston University), evolves towards a personal, transformative process, one that demands reflection, resilience, and an acute awareness of the institutional forces shaping individual success.

Keywords*: Professional Development; Postmodernism; Higher Education; Reflexive Thematic Analysis; Academic Identity; Agency and Power; Institutional Frameworks; Research Excellence Framework (REF); Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship; Relativistic Ontology*

Personal Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and thank the people who agreed to talk part in the research. Their authenticity, transparency and insights were critical for the formation of this thesis, and without their time and knowledge, this research would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my supervisory team, Professor Keith Schofield, Professor Nicholas O'Regan and Professor Phil Mizen for their time, expertise and input. In different ways, they have helped to shape my thinking, both about the thesis and about my world view, and for that I am particularly grateful.

I would like to think my friends, family and colleagues for any of the support they have offered and for their ability to help keep me going and remain motivated. Completing a doctorate on a part-time basis is an interesting and illuminating challenge, and a road that would be difficult to travel without the right support mechanisms in place.

I also want to thank my past, present and future self for making the most of the opportunity that completing a doctorate has offered me and this is a commitment to myself to make the most of the learning I have done for my future endeavours.

Thank you to Aston University for providing me with the opportunity to do the doctorate, allowing me to explore, plan and try to influence professional development opportunities for the better.

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Abbreviations

BSS: Business and Social Science
CIPD: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CoP: Communities of Practice
DBA: Doctor in Business Administration
HE: Higher Education
KEF: Knowledge Exchange Framework
PhD: Doctor in Philosophy
QAA: Quality Assurance Agency
RAE: Research Assessment Exercise
REF: Research Excellence Framework
RTA: Reflexive Thematic Analysis
T&R: Teaching and Research
TA: Thematic Analysis
TEF: Teaching Excellence Framework

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1. Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of my personal and professional background, values, and motivations as the foundation for the research. It foregrounds the significance of reflexivity, demonstrating how personal insights, experiences, and evolving perspectives shape both the direction and interpretation of the research. Recognising reflexivity as a critical tool, the chapter begins with a personal reflexivity statement, emphasising the importance of self-awareness and critical reflection in research. Additionally, you will find an outline of the research context, situating the study at Aston University, and within the College of Business and Social Science. The rationale for this study is the need to explore the complexities of professional development in academia amid rising demands and evolving institutional expectations. The impetus behind the research, including the pervasive influence of performance metrics and national frameworks, particularly how they shape academic identity, autonomy, and professional growth. A justification for the research is presented, detailing the need to understand and support academic development as an organisational and personal imperative.

Reflexivity statement

Ideas on reflexivity are important, as it can facilitate self-awareness, and it gives individuals the ability to understand their own context and the social structures around them. It allows for axiological decentring (Kolman and Matějčková, 2022), a term that describes the process of recognising others as centres of concern, acknowledging perspectives and incorporating the needs of others into our own needs. Reflexivity is an ongoing process, one that involves critical reflection and a move to understanding yourself, others and the context around you (Dean, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022b). It is underpinned by a motivation to want to develop, to challenge assumptions and to acknowledge that this is a continuous and ever evolving journey. With that context in mind, I want to take time to explore my own journey so that my view of the world, my interpretations, my motivations and my feelings can all be understood as an intrinsic part of the way my research has developed, and the way it will continue to develop.

My original aspiration when moving from School to University, was a longer-term goal to become an Educational Psychologist. I really wanted to understand how individuals learn, how they develop, and to work in an environment that would allow me to enhance that process. As I learnt more about the field, while the motivations were similar, the reality of performing the role of Educational Psychologist did not seem to marry up with my expectations. My first degree was in Behavioural Science, and that provided a mixture of different disciplines: psychology, sociology and anthropology. While I specialised in psychology, so that I could attain general basis for registration with the British Psychological Society, I really enjoyed understanding different perspectives on how to understand and interpret individuals, cultures, society and people from different critical perspectives. Reflecting on what areas of interest would suit me better, I wanted to combine that passion for the way people learn and develop with an understanding of organisations and people in the workplace. The goal was to work towards becoming a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and a plan was born.

At that time, I wanted to complete a MSc in Occupational Psychology at Cardiff University. It was well regarded within the industry, had excellent tutors from what I could tell, and it was local to home. However, it had tough entry criteria, and I wanted to gain experience before going onto the course so that I could make the most of it. I went on to study a Post Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management, as this area of expertise aligned well with Occupational Psychology, and it would enhance my prospects for finding employment; experience that would form the ideal foundation for enhancing my MSc studies at Cardiff. The Post Graduate Diploma was particularly enjoyable as all the tutors combined academic expertise and rigour with real world experience, and ability to bring lectures to life with stories and anecdotes. That, for me, was a very different experience compared to the undergraduate degree, and really resonated with me in terms of a style and expertise that helped my learning journey.

On completion of the course, I was in a much more favourable position to find good work experience. I had a qualification in Human Resource Management, and more importantly, I had gained membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the professional body for the people profession. It was this membership that would play an important part in me finding work during that year before attending the MSc at Cardiff, but it has continued to play a role in my professional development and skills development throughout my career. During that interim year I gained experience working in Boots the Chemist, performing a role that was focused on the recruitment and training of staff ready for

retail work. I also gained experience working within The Court Service, a public sector body responsible for managing the Crown and County courts around Wales and England. The remit of my HR and Training roles there covered the whole of the Wales and Chester Court Circuit. Those experiences, both vastly different, really helped to shape my thoughts about the workplace, recognising different cultures, climates, processes and strategies for managing, and getting the most out of, people in different ways. This proved to be an excellent foundation for entry on to the MSc in Occupational Psychology, but also to help me shape my ability to be successful on the MSc.

The MSc has shaped my career in many ways. The content complimented the Human Resource Management qualification, as there was clear dovetailing of the theories and ideas presented with those on the previous course. The way I envision it in my head is to think about a Venn diagram where each of those areas of expertise are a circle, but where there is an overlap. Some areas of knowledge and skills are shared, but there are clear distinctions between the work of occupational psychologists and human resource professionals. The former conduct research, analyse the findings and are determined to understand the drivers and mechanisms of what drives behaviour in the workplace from a theoretical and development perspective. The latter, human resource management professionals, are more focused on the application of knowledge, the development of policies and practices, workplace feedback loops and the implementation of techniques based on research. In my opinion, that distinction has blurred over the last 20 years, and there is now more overlap and increased skills and knowledge sharing.

The MSc gave me the knowledge and skills to understand how performance management techniques can affect employees, its link to employee engagement and motivation, and the variance of employer-based systems of work. It also allowed me to develop my knowledge further on the way people learn, the construction of good learning and development solutions, and the barriers that can affect learning from a psychological perspective. More than that though, there was a focus on culture, climate, ergonomics, work environments, counselling, coaching, a whole range of aspects that affect people in the workplace from a psychological perspective. In all the jobs I have done since, the knowledge and skills I developed at this stage of my life have served me well as a foundation for career achievement.

One of the most important things I took away from both of those courses was the social aspects that are important in learning, not only from a theoretical perspective, but also how

much it meant to me across all the courses I have completed. The ability to connect with others, to learn from them, to understand different opinions and to expand my view on the world in depth and breadth are hugely beneficial. Those connections not only helped to shape my ideas on the modules I undertook, but it also helped to shape my views more broadly on who I was, and who I would be in the future. I continue to reflect on those experiences and the effect they have had on me. For instance, when I completed my project for my Post Grad Diploma, I was able to conduct research on culture change at a Marks and Spencer (M&S) store, one of the biggest in the UK. At the time M&S were going through a period of significant upheaval, and I was able to explore the attitudes and behaviours of staff regarding various change initiatives due to the connections I had made on my course, and the capability I had demonstrated. When I was on my MSc, I was able to learn from people who had a wide range of experiences, but I also performed the role of class rep, and that allowed me to develop the class community further and find additional opportunities for interaction and learning. I sought a balance between seizing and creating opportunities, understanding the importance of networks for my own development, and enabling the development and success of those around me.

From that point, I went on to gain experiences across recruitment and selection, more generalist HR management roles, learning and development specialist roles and careers advice and guidance. I was able to expand my experiences across sectors by working for a housing association, for property lawyers, for small independent recruitment consultancies through to holding senior roles at global recruitment businesses. Additionally, I have gained experience being self-employed, performing consultancy work, delivering coaching to senior executives and running a photography business. When reflecting on those experiences I can begin to interpret the interrelated connections between each role, and how skills transcend role type and sector. By being self-reflective, self-critical and developmentally motivated, the connections I have made between my skills and experiences have allowed me to elevate my success.

Why is all this important? The way I have developed previously, the success I have gained and the things that have gone wrong, have all helped learn and develop up until this point and will continue to shape me for the future. My individual journey is different to anybody else's, the trials and tribulations, the successes and the joy, they all contribute to the here and now of my story, and they will continue to shape my future. These influences also shape my research ideas, they refine how I interpret information and the way I interact with others, and they colour the analysis I do for this thesis. This whole experience is developmental,

reflective and reflexive. When I started my journey on the doctorate I worked in professional services as a Senior Research Manager, one that was responsible for administrating the processes around the Research Excellence Framework (REF) within the Business School, writing the environment statement, driving the publication review process, selecting our research portfolio, and ensuring our impact case studies were fully matured.

As I finish my research journey I have moved to an academic position as a Teaching Fellow, have gained Senior Fellow status from Advance HE, and have performed the role of Interim Deputy Head of Department. These experiences, like the ones before it, have shifted and mutated over time highlighting the twists and turns of my career, emphasising the need for adaptability, demonstrating the importance of varied experiences, the necessity for reflection and the value of connections. All of this is reflected in my interpretation of the data, and in my values and beliefs. The things that I value are the power of development, the merit of introspection, and the benefit of connections. I am interested in enhancing individuals, developing their strengths, understanding their journey and looking after their wellbeing. I love learning, and I want to enthuse others so that can develop their understanding of themselves and encourage them with ideas on how they can make the most of their time on this planet.

Context of the research

As an employee of Aston University for the last 10 years, covering a range of different roles, I have gained a breadth of knowledge about how the organisation works, understand the way it is structured, and built a network that stretches across the University. In my position of Senior Research Manager, the university offered me the opportunity to pursue a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA). The DBA offers those undertaking it a different opportunity to a Doctor in Philosophy (PhD) programme. It is directed towards providing an opportunity for managers to use their practical experience, in combination with advanced theoretical knowledge and understanding, to further their careers. It is geared towards solving problems, usually within an organisation, but can often be a springboard for expanding practice based thinking (Kalika and Platt, 2022). As such, it was important to me to identify a topic that would make a tangible difference at Aston University, as well as utilise the knowledge, skills and experience I had gained to date. The DBA would be a great way to advance my own development journey. Motivated, and filled with energy, I selected a topic that was timely, relevant and impactful.

Justification for the research

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) suggest that organisational change is constant (CIPD, 2024) and rapid (CIPD, 2019). As the professional body for human resources management and people development, the CIPD are continually monitoring and interpreting the evolution of workplace leadership, management and behaviours. For the Higher Education (HE) sector, this is also true, change is unrelenting and there is increasing pressure to capture and measure performance. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Government, 2017; National Audit Office, 2017), and the subsequent establishment of UKRI (United Kingdom Research and Innovation) and the OfS (Office for Students), came into being through that desire to increase excellence across HE. Instruments, including the REF (UKRI, 2024b), the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) (Office for Students (OfS), 2024) and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) (UKRI, 2024a) are used to measure, assess and compare excellence across HE. The comparison of universities was not the original intention (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2011; Bishop, 2016; Pearce, 2019), however, the measurement of university performance has, quite naturally, led to comparison between universities. The comparisons drive rankings, and ratings, and this has increased the quantity, breadth and intensity of demands placed on academics. This includes, but is not limited to, the areas of teaching, research, knowledge transfer, leadership, civic engagement, management and administration (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006; Boyd and Smith, 2016).

The development of organisations, and the individuals within them, are vital factors for organisational success (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Asfaw, Argaw and Bayissa, 2015; Armstrong and Taylor, 2020; Oyewole Oluwaseun, 2020). If the demands placed on individuals working within HE change, due to internal or external factors, then the support mechanisms and opportunities offered to staff to help them develop also need to change to be effective and appropriate. There is a good understanding of the expectations that are placed on colleagues in academia, however, does the same understanding exist for how individuals can meet those expectations? There are frameworks, for instance, that can help guide and shape the work of academics at an individual level. The United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023) and the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (Vitae, 2011) promote excellence in teaching and research respectively. These frameworks, both different, only capture part of the roles performed by

academics. It is an indicator of the complexity of an academic role and demonstrates how difficult it might be to achieve mastery across all the different areas included in such roles. If staff are to be effective in their role, then first they would need to understand what success looks like, for them as individuals (Schön, 1991; Bolton and Delderfield, 2018; Goleman, 2020) and for the context within which they find themselves. Individuals would need to develop self-awareness, reflective practices, and other knowledge, skills and experience that would facilitate their success. The ease in which this could be done would depend on a range of factors, such as the support provided to individuals, the environment they work within, management structure, and the individual's level of self-awareness.

The complexity of development pathways increases when contract type, learning preferences, managerial ability and other individual circumstances are factored into this equation. For instance, when this research was designed, more than half of all academic staff (52%) at Aston University were on contracts demanding excellence in both teaching and research (HESA, 2020). Those on teaching focused contracts (27%) or research focused contracts (21%) could be considered to have more straightforward development pathways as their attention was concentrated on one area, not both. Additionally, how an academic member of staff learns from colleagues will vary depending on the level of experience they have developed (Van Waes *et al.*, 2016) and where that experience was gained also influences the types of professional development opportunities needed (Darling-Hammond, 1988; Devaney and Sykes, 1988; Sprott, 2019). Sprott found that, when analysing the roots of academic skill development, problem solving skills are usually developed outside of HE, not within it. This could mean that a member of staff, with no experience outside of HE, may miss an opportunity to develop problem solving skills. This would seem be a prerequisite for an academic as things can, and do, go wrong. It seems strange that essential skills, like these, could be absent, or poorly developed, in many staff members.

There are a lot of factors, at the individual level, that can affect professional development, and this is magnified by the wide range of skills and abilities needed to perform an academic role effectively. It would be prudent to wonder what other skills, like problem solving, could be missing from the development pathways offered within HE. This research seeks to explore whether more focus should be placed on understanding individual needs and that the provision of effective developmental pathways should increase. Should academics question, explore and seek to understand the value and nature of national measurement tools, the role and influence of organisational objectives, and how individual developmental

journeys align with both? It seems likely that academic professional development encompasses a delicate balance between the needs of the individual, the organisation and national objectives.

Research purpose and approach

This research will explore the professional development of academic staff. It takes a bottom-up perspective where the focus is placed on understanding individual accounts and their context. The research will take place at Aston University and focus on academic staff on Teaching and Research contacts in the College of Business and Social Sciences. The research will explore the thoughts of individuals regarding their understanding of professional development, their developmental journey and the influence of experience. Additionally, there will be a consideration of the tensions that exist within the job (if any), and how significantly their personal development motivations, objectives, and experiences are valued against the objectives of the University and wider external pressures. The research uses a postmodern perspective as an analytical tool to deconstruct power relationships, understand and critique the influence of metrics and measurements, and consider the extent to which individual journeys and context are appreciated and supported.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter has established the personal and academic context that informs the research, providing a lens through which the study on professional development will be approached. By integrating reflexivity as a foundational element, the chapter emphasises the importance of self-awareness, experience, and critical reflection in shaping one's research journey and findings. The chapter has also justified the study's relevance in the contemporary HE landscape, where academic roles are increasingly complex, and professional growth is influenced by both institutional metrics and individual needs.

Overall, this chapter underscores the research's aim to examine professional development through a postmodern lens, seeking to uncover the nuanced dynamics of power, identity, and agency in academia. It sets the stage for a study that values diverse perspectives and advocates for a more individualised, context-sensitive approach to academic growth within HE.

2. Literature Review

Chapter overview

This chapter offers an exploration of the theoretical and contextual influences on professional development in academia, framing it as a guide to understanding key areas that may impact growth within this complex field. While the areas discussed, such as postmodern critiques, HE metrics, organisational culture, and developmental models highlight significant factors, the vast scope of professional development means this chapter does not encompass all possible influences. Instead, it provides a focused starting point, allowing space for additional themes to emerge naturally from the research.

The chapter begins with postmodernism, exploring its relevance to professional development by questioning traditional structures and grand narratives that often shape academic practice. A look at the HE landscape follows, focusing on metrics that standardise definitions of academic success, and how a postmodern critique would suggest that they may marginalise subjective experiences and individual autonomy. The chapter then examines formal professional development frameworks, focusing on the Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship. The model provides a structured, multi-layered approach to research, teaching, and outreach, and how it can offer insight into professional development of academic staff. Learning theories such as social constructivism, experiential learning, and self-directed learning are also explored, particularly with reference to postmodernism's emphasis on context-specific learning. Given the inductive nature of this study, this literature review does not set rigid boundaries for interpreting professional development. Instead, it provides guiding themes that are open to reinterpretation, and through the research reflect the complex realities of academic professional development.

Postmodernism

What is postmodernism?

To understand postmodernism, we first need to understand modernism, and how that developed. In Europe, during the 17th and 18th century, there was a profound shift in thinking where traditional structures, such as the authority of the church, the appropriateness of absolute monarchy (where the authority of the monarch was not bound by any law or governance), and long-standing social hierarchies, were being questioned and their value

reconsidered. This was known as ‘The Enlightenment’ (Proudfoot and Lacey, 2009; Pagden, 2013; Shand, 2017; Robertson, 2022). It was through people like Immanuel Kant, Voltaire and John Locke that the ideas and ideals of reason, science, and progress emerged, where logic and reasoning were applied to all aspects of human life. Rational thought was valued over superstition and dogma. Empiricism (the theory that knowledge comes from experience derived from the senses), rationalism (the belief that reason is the primary source of knowledge), and humanism (the idea that humans are capable of self-determination and that progress can be attained without religion or supernatural beliefs) were key ideas that underpinned The Enlightenment. It was argued that education, scientific enquiry and the application of reason would drive improvements in society and alleviate suffering.

From these Enlightenment foundations, modernism emerged in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a movement that applied these values to the arts, sciences, and society in general. Modernism maintained the Enlightenment’s belief in objective truths and grand narratives—universal truths that explained reality, human nature, and progress. In philosophy and science, this era saw figures like Auguste Comte, who proposed a ‘science of society’ through positivism, which argued that empirical science was the only legitimate form of knowledge (Comte, 1865, p. 61). Similarly, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and Karl Marx’s social theories embodied modernist ideas, striving to uncover underlying structures of the mind and society, respectively, as a means of understanding and transforming the human condition (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Sim, 2011). This idea of a singular path or absolute truth did not take account of the complex nature of life, its differences and the cultural variances.

As modernism was explored further, and there was a greater focus on understanding form and function, there was a move to what we know as structuralism. This was particularly influential in the mid-20th century, as the emphasis turned toward explaining human experience through deep, underlying structures, ones that shape culture, language, and thought (Saussure, 1959; Lévi Strauss, 1962). This approach posited that systems of meaning could be mapped and understood as interconnected frameworks, where each element gains significance from its relationship to others. However, critics like Derrida (1978) and Foucault (1972, 1977; 1980) argued that such structures impose limitations, suggesting that the frameworks meant to explain reality can also restrict personal and cultural interpretation. These poststructuralist critiques laid the groundwork for postmodernist thinking, with Lyotard (1979) notably challenging the idea of ‘grand narratives’, the idea of universal explanations that claim to apply to all experiences. The poststructuralist ideas were

subsumed by postmodernism, where the focus became broader, and with it a rejection of ideas that reduced individual and cultural complexity to fixed, overarching systems. Instead, there was a recognition of the multiplicity and fluidity of human experience (Bauman, 1992). This shift set the stage for questioning rigid, normative structures and encouraged embracing the fragmented and subjective nature of reality. The goals inherent in The Enlightenment, based on modernity, science and democracy, would not be the mechanism that freed people. Instead, postmodernists believed it would become the oppressor, locking humanity into a singular path of thought, a process not necessarily in the best interests of the population (Sim, 2011; Robertson, 2022).

Why is postmodernism relevant?

For postmodernists, truth is seen as relative, fragmented, constructed, multiple and conflicting. It is social, cultural and linguistic forces that drive its construction, and when compared against modernism, there is no objective reality. It is not neutral, it is shaped by power relations, often reflective of the interests of those in power. Postmodernism, at its heart, wants to deconstruct the power structures, and expose the ways in which these structures influence and shape knowledge, language and reality. Jacques Derrida, often associated with ideas around deconstruction (Derrida, 1978; Sim, 2011), believed that words derive meaning through their difference to other words, not through a direct relationship to something. This makes language unstable for conveying meaning, as it can be affected by context, culture and language system differences.

For instance, if we think about context and languages systems, we could use the word ‘snow’ to highlight differences. In Central Africa, snow is almost entirely absent, and as such, that word might hold little significance, be associated with a generic concept of coldness, or something distant and hard to relate to. It has much less relevance as a word, and a construct. On the other hand, if we take the Arctic, where snow is central to existence and survival, there may be different words to describe different types of snow, with a variety of nuance attached to each (Boas, 1922; Lévi Strauss, 1962). From this we can see that language is deeply contextual and culturally embedded. Derrida, in this work, would suggest that the word ‘snow’ gains meaning, not by direct connection to snow as a physical substance, but by differences from other terms and its contexts (Derrida, 1978). In the Arctic, you might find that the meaning of snow is shaped by distinctions, such as wet snow, dry snow, snow suitable for building. Meaning here is relational and constantly shifting depending on context. As weather systems change, perhaps the meanings of snow will

change, as the context changes. It is here we can embrace the value of deconstruction, it is tool for uncovering hidden assumptions, contradictions and power dynamics, whether that is in text, ideas or social practices.

Within postmodernism, ideas around the relationship between knowledge and power, have been particularly important. Michel Foucault, for instance, has shaped postmodern thinking through his insights into how institutions regulate and control people through ‘discourses’ (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1990; Foucault and Gordon, 1980). Through analysis of institutions, such as prisons, hospitals and schools, he demonstrated that knowledge production is not objective, rather, it is deeply intertwined with power. He proposed that societal categorisations, such as ‘madness’, ‘criminality’, or ‘deviance’, are socially constructed and their creation and use is driven by what services the power regimes of the time. His work on how governments regulate populations through discourses around health, sexuality and other aspects of life, demonstrates how a postmodern perspective can be used to critique norms and uncover control mechanisms.

Governments and institutions, in Foucault’s view, exert control over the population, and therefore the individuals within them, through regulations, public health polices and institutions, like hospitals, that are responsible for managing life (Foucault, 1972; Foucault and Gordon, 1980). The NHS can be considered a form of biopower (Foucault, 1990), as within his theorising, it is a form of power and control that exerts influence over the life, health and wellbeing of people. Clapping for the NHS, during the pandemic, was a show of socially constructed public support, recognising the NHS as vital and appreciated. This fits well with the discourse of health and wellbeing being central to societal stability, though this public recognition contrasts starkly with the current defunding and privatisation happening across healthcare services and undermining the very systems that people are applauding. For Foucault, ideas of power are nuanced, it is not always direct, or coercive, but operates in indirect ways, through norms, discourses and more subtle control mechanisms. By uncovering these contradictions, we highlight the disparities in power relationships and discover that it is the governmental polices that have power, as they affect funding, operations and access to healthcare. These underlying power structures, and the subsequent decisions, are what Foucault would argue are driving control and inequality. Yet, at the same time, the power and control are masked by public gestures, like clapping. Such gestures give the illusion of solidarity, and suggest positive commitment to the NHS, when really the opposite is true. Discourse frames the opinion of the pubic, while power shapes the realities of life and death.

It is important to consider ideas around Identity and subjectivity as there are key differences between modernist and postmodernist thinking. Modernist thinkers believe there is a unified, stable self, whereas postmodernists argue that identity is fluid, fragmented and constructed (through culture, society and history). Some theorists, such as Judith Baxter, have combined postmodern and feminist theorising to critique gender. Baxter argued that the categorisation of 'male' and 'female' are not biologically determined, rather they are social constructs, generated, shaped and reshaped through the repetition of performance and discourse (Baxter, 2003). Through this, societal norms, expectations and institutions have positioned men as strong and resilient, and women as fragile and weak. These culturally reinforced ideas serve to maintain the power dynamics within patriarchal systems where men maintain social, political and economic dominance. If we frame strength, for instance, as being based on physical attributes, where men are often perceived to have an advantage, we undervalue or even ignore mental, emotional and resilient strengths. This is not just about biology, but about how language and discourse shape, maintain and reinforce power imbalances. The metaphors we use, the gendered language in media and education, and just simply the way men and women are talked about all continue to perpetuate stereotypes. The binary nature of conversations, such as the one described above around gender, ignore the complexity of human abilities and contexts (Foucault, 1990; Baxter, 2003; Butler, 2006). The deconstruction of binary oppositions, such as the ones which are hallmark of The Enlightenment and modernism, are a key component of postmodern critique.

Postmodernism has its detractors and has received significant criticism, particularly its scepticism around truth and objective knowledge (Lyotard, 1979; Sim, 2011), and it fails to take a stand on important moral or political issues. Some critics argue that postmodernism undermines the possibility for rational discourse and democratic debate (Habermas, 1987), and others argue that it is quick to critique others theories but offers no alternative to the systems being critiqued (Kirby, 2006). There are some postmodernists who recognise that there is tension in their thinking. By being sceptical of grand narratives, it makes it impossible to offer another to replace what is being critiqued. From a Marxist perspective, postmodernism puts too much focus on cultural and linguistic analysis, and lacks focus on the material conditions that generate exploitation and inequality. Marxists focus on class struggle, and the economic structure of society, whereas postmodernists would suggest power is much more diffuse and less specific (Foucault, 1977). Marxists see capitalism as the source of inequality, exploitation and class domination, and their end goal is a classless society. Alternatively, postmodernists see power being exercised through knowledge and

social norms, not just economic exploitation. For them it is a broader set of fluid relationships across various domains, such as religion, sexuality, race and gender.

A big difference between a Marxist viewpoint and a postmodern one is the core belief in progress and a universal truth. Postmodernists are clear on their belief in multiple truths and reality, that are subjective, fluid, ever changing and based around context (Bauman, 1992; Sim, 2011). However, both do have a keen focus on tackling inequality, encouraging equity and working towards a better society. Similar goals but starkly different pathways laid out to reach them, and it could be argued that postmodernism doesn't even offer a pathway. Postmodernism may not provide a singular alternative to the structures it critiques, but its value lies in its constant questioning and refusal to accept totalising truths. By deconstructing the language, power, and norms that shape our understanding of the world, postmodernism opens space for marginalised voices, promotes pluralism, and protects against theory holding without critique (Derrida, 1978). Its inherent scepticism serves to hold in check any overreaching grand narrative, whether political, scientific, or ideological, making it an essential tool for navigating complex and ever-evolving social realities. This latter point is the reason it resonates with me so much on a personal level, and why I feel it is a useful tool for inclusion here. It allows me to see the structures and nuance around me with greater clarity, it aligns to my belief that we should be focused on individual stories and the context within which people find themselves and increasing my motivation and ability to want to find answers and improvements, even if it does not tell me exactly how to do that.

The Higher Education Context

Within HE, metrics and measurements are now the norm, particularly the REF (UKRI, 2024b). The REF is designed to enable the identification of research excellence within the HE sector and was originally introduced in 1986 as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Over that time, it has been the main driving force used to measure the quality of UK HE Institutions, and the foundation for assessing and comparing research quality in universities. The results from the REF are used to allocate quality-weighted research funding to universities from the national funding Councils. The results are also used by external organisations to produce guides on university performance and to rank them. For instance, scores obtained in the REF exercise contribute to the Complete University Guide to form a 'research quality' score (Complete University Guide Limited, 2024). This can influence an institution's ability to recruit students, the most important income generation pathway (HIgher

Education Statistics Agency, 2021), as well as its ability to foster relationships with organisations, and generate research funding.

Over more recent years, the measurement of excellence in HE has expanded. Alongside the REF, It now includes the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Office for Students (OfS), 2024) and also the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) (UKRI, 2024a). The TEF is used to assess teaching excellence in Universities and Colleges across the UK. Starting in 2019, it runs every two years and rates institutions with *Gold*, *Silver*, *Bronze* or *Requires Improvement* ratings (Office for Students (OfS), 2024). The idea of 'world-class universities' has perpetuated a model in which research is valued more highly, often overshadowing teaching in discussions around academic excellence (Altbach and Salmi, 2011). With the advent of TEF, Universities that excel at teaching now have a mechanism to demonstrate their teaching prowess, in a way that is disentangled from research capabilities, and one that starts to address the imbalance between the perceived value of research versus teaching (Deem and Baird, 2019; Perkins, 2019; Universities UK, 2019). As a potential student, it would be worth considering whether it is the teaching quality that is likely to influence your experience and success at university, rather than the research capabilities of an institution. By combining the results of both the REF and TEF, it could be argued that it is a much more effective mechanism for assessing the quality and expertise of a university, particularly for those making a choice on where to study. From a postmodernist viewpoint, such as Foucault (Foucault, 1972; Foucault and Gordon, 1980) or Lyotard (Lyotard, 1979), we would need to question who holds the power to define 'excellence', whether in teaching or research. Postmodernists would argue that there is no single endpoint for what constitutes excellent teaching or research; rather, these concepts are fluid, shaped by the interests of dominant institutions and the cultural context in which they are applied.

The third national measurement exercise that has been introduced is the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) (UKRI, 2024a). The first results of the exercise appeared in 2021 and purported to measure the knowledge exchange effectiveness of universities i.e. moving knowledge from the source to the potential user of that knowledge (Vitae, 2020). These types of measurements though, like KEF and others, overemphasise quantitative metrics, and miss out on important qualitative aspects, such as community engagement impact. Additionally, it could inadvertently encourage universities to prioritise activities that are easily measurable (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Hazelkorn, 2016; Watermeyer, 2019). Taking a postmodern view of KEF, much like TEF and REF, it can reinforce power structures, in this case by privileging certain forms of knowledge over others. Research in

the arts, humanities and social sciences, could be penalised as they are less easy to measure by economic factors that link to 'impact'. Again, by placing value on a particular form of knowledge, we elevate it above all other forms of knowledge, potentially making them seem less legitimate or important. How can we expect to drive innovation, and grow breadth of knowledge, when we are filtering success down such a narrow channel?

Metrics, like REF, TEF and KEF, are part of a move towards professionalising the work of academic staff members (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006). There has been increased management, heightened pressure and less autonomy applied to the role of an academic. It is not surprising that the increased time and effort used to assess Universities, and the increased pressure to achieve excellence, trickles down to the workplace, leading to further demands being placed on academic staff. From a postmodernist perspective (Foucault, 1972; Lyotard, 1979; Foucault and Gordon, 1980; Bauman, 1992; Sim, 2011), these frameworks can be seen as instruments of control, reinforcing top-down governance and standardisation, while potentially marginalising alternative forms of knowledge and curtailing academic freedom. The latter, often regarded as a cornerstone of higher education, ensures that academics can engage in research, teaching and public discourse without interference or censorship (Altbach, 2001; Finkin and Post, 2009). The focus on measurable outcomes, whether research, teaching, or knowledge exchange, reflects modernist ideals of progress and efficiency, but postmodern thinkers would argue that these metrics obscure the complex, fragmented realities of academic work and push against notions of academic freedom. Autonomy, creativity, and the diversity of academic endeavours risk being absorbed into a system of measurable 'excellence,' at the detriment of the lived experiences and subjective realities of staff. As such, while these frameworks claim to provide a holistic view of university performance, they may in fact contribute to the rationalisation and commodification of academia, reducing knowledge production and teaching to standardised, quantifiable outcomes.

Culture, Climate and Organisational Development

While organisations, including those in HE, will be influenced by the wider context in which they find themselves, each organisation will have its own culture and climate, often with variations depending on the size, structure and internal dynamics (Schein, 2004; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011; Kummerow and Kirby, 2013). It was Elliott Jacques, back in 1951, who first described the concept of organisational culture, referring to how members of an organisation collectively shape their thoughts, behaviours, values and norms. All of these

can be thought of as the implicit mechanisms organisations encourage, or suppress, the ways employees think and act (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013). There have been various attempts to describe what exactly organisational culture is and one of the best, and perhaps one of the more simple suggestions, is to describe organisational culture as 'the way we do things around here' (Deal and Kennedy, 1988, p. 4). The CIPD (Young, 2020) point out that there are multiple academic definitions of culture, however, at the heart of those definitions is a general understanding that culture describes a shared set of basic assumptions, the organisation's underlying values, beliefs and principles, and that these get passed on through an organisation. For me, this could be thought of as the organisation's personality. This matters, as it is an important way for employees to understand the organisation, it helps them contribute towards it, and it allows them to make connections. The values, beliefs and norms associated with an organisation's culture can influence development at the organisational, team and individual level. However, while it is often suggested that strong culture leads to improved performance, the evidence for this is weak (Deal and Kennedy, 1988; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011; Young, 2020).

If we think of organisational culture as the way things are done then we can think of organisational climate as the way people attach meaning to, or understand, the culture of the organisation (Young, 2020). For me, if we take the example of culture being the personality of an organisation, then the climate can be thought of as the mood of the organisation. While culture grows over time (Dewi and Wibowo, 2020), climate is an understanding of what is happening right here, right now, in the organisation and something that can motivate people and drives behaviour (Asio and Jimenez, 2020; Emmanuel *et al.*, 2020; Young, 2020). Likewise, the climate of an organisation can disengage, demotivate and create emotional tension e.g. anger, resentment, unease or disappointment. The terms culture and climate are sometimes used interchangeably, however, they are distinct. The culture of an organisation can be built over time to represent norms that encourage self-development, where improvement is valued and that engaging in these activities is important (Gartner, 2019; Dewi and Wibowo, 2020). However, it is possible for the organisational climate to be out of sync with the culture. For instance, a change in management, a different communication style or staff turnover could all change the climate. It is easy to see how both the culture, and climate, of an organisation are important to consider as a context for professional development activity, particularly when they are mismatched.

From a postmodern perspective, it is important to critique the role of power dynamics, and how it shapes organisational culture and climate. Given that HE institutions are increasingly

driven by metrics and performance indicators through mechanisms like REF, TEF and KEF. These frameworks, while aiming to improve institutional performance, also serve as agents of control, reinforcing managerialism and how academic labour is commodified. At their heart, these external metrics are bound to modernist ideals, such as progress and efficiency. From a postmodern perspective, they are top-down structures that marginalise the complex contexts, and lived realities, of academics. Such metrics often shape development opportunities to align with institutional priorities and can often ignore the needs of the individual. The focus on measurable outcomes priorities quantifiable success, such as publication counts, awarded funding and student satisfaction scores. Holistic, subjective measures of academic growth and potential tend to be put to one side. This links back to the work of Foucault (Foucault, 1977; Foucault and Gordon, 1980), where he suggested that institutions regulate and control individuals through seemingly neutral structures like evaluations and performance indicators. Through that view, we can see that REF, TEF and KEF might not just assess excellence, but reproduce and reinforce underlying power relations and could constrain professional development and stifle individual growth, and by extension institutional growth. In this context the postmodern critique becomes valuable as we challenge the narrative that REF, TEF and KEF provide unbiased and neutral measures of excellence. The constructed truths, shaped by power dynamics within an institution, may not align with an individual's aspirations or developmental needs.

Formal Frameworks for Professional Development

Engaged scholarship

Engaged scholarship is an approach to research that is based around collaboration between academic staff and the broader community, including industry, government, and other stakeholders. It acts as an intercept point can bring together activities, such as research, knowledge exchange and teaching. With this research being based at Aston University, it's desire (Aston University, 2024) to integrate itself into the local community, generate impact and form partnerships, makes it appropriate to discuss different models of engaged scholarship, and consider their relevance for the institution. In the Diamond Model (Van de Ven, 2007), engaged scholarship is described as a participative form of research, one that generates stakeholder perspectives as part of problem exploration, with the idea that this would help bring academia closer to the real world. In particular, this model focusses on the individual, and Van de Ven suggests that engaged scholarship is made up of four fundamental activities: Problem Formation, Theory Building, Research Design and Problem

Solving. While the model has been well received, it has been questioned about its ability to achieve internal and external validity, its ability to keep research goals intact, and whether it can really translate well into practice (McKelvey, 2006; Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Shawcross and Ridgman, 2015).

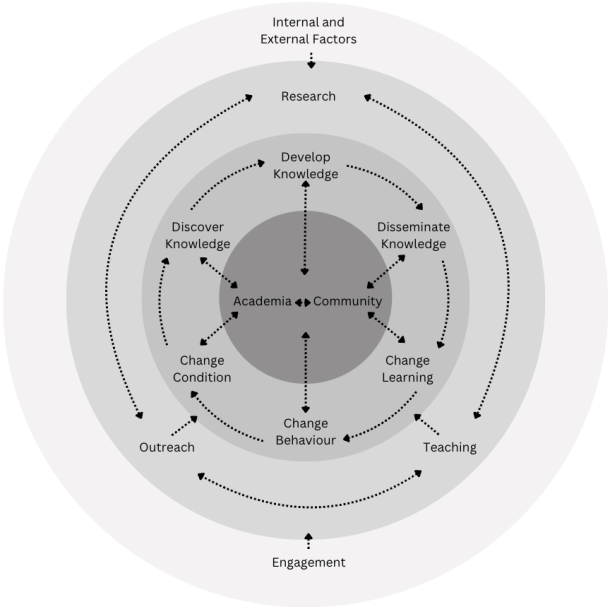
Boyer (1996), on the other hand, presented an institutional level model involving four types of scholarship: discovery, application, teaching and integration. While the first three areas relate to traditional university missions, his idea of 'integration' identified the connections possible between research, teaching and outreach. Boyer pointed out that faculty members often have competing obligations; an important contextual element missing from the Van de Ven model. However, from a postmodern perspective, both Boyer's and Van de Ven's models could be seen as imposing structures that, while intended to validate and expand academic roles, ultimately restrict the fluidity and multiplicity that postmodernism argues for. Postmodern theorists like Derrida (1978) and Lyotard (1979) would question whether these frameworks risk creating rigid boundaries that limit scholarly identity and oversimplify the nuances of engaged scholarship. Boyer's classification of scholarship into discrete categories, for example, might inadvertently privilege certain activities while marginalising others, creating an implicit hierarchy within academic work. Similarly, Van de Ven's model, while collaborative, emphasises linear stages (Problem Formation, Theory Building, Research Design, and Problem Solving) that may not align with the unpredictable, emergent nature of real-world problems.

In both cases, the structured nature of these models could, as Foucault (Foucault, 1972; 1980) might argue, reinforce existing power structures within academia by depicting what constitutes 'legitimate' scholarship. Such frameworks risk positioning the university as decision maker on what forms of inquiry are valued over others. Additionally, a postmodern critique would consider how these models might overlook the diversity and subjectivity inherent in community and stakeholder relationships. They run the risk of reducing complex, situated knowledge into neatly categorised types or stages, and may unintentionally undermine the engagement they aim to foster. They could lower the value placed on the rich, contextual realities of stakeholders in the favour of institutional objectives, thereby limiting their effectiveness in developing pluralistic, context-sensitive scholarship.

A more holistic model of engaged scholarship has been proposed by Franz (2009). This model combines individual level considerations of engaged scholarship (e.g. Van de Ven, 2007), with those at an institutional level (e.g. Boyer, 1996), while also incorporating external factors. The

Franz model highlights the influence of research, teaching and outreach in the performance of engaged scholarship while also referencing how internal and external factors can affect its delivery.

Figure 1. Adapted from Franz Engaged Scholarship Model (Franz, 2009: 33)



The Franz model of engaged scholarship (Figure 1) has four concentric rings, each of which represents a different, but equally important, dimension of engagement (Franz, 2009). This structure underscores the holistic nature of engaged scholarship showing the interconnected activities. The outer ring addresses the internal and external factors that shape engaged scholarship, as well as the engagement assumptions underpinning these efforts. Internal factors might include institutional support, leadership priorities, and reward structures, while external factors include broader societal needs, funding opportunities, and community expectations. Engagement assumptions are based around the idea that engaged scholarship should be mutually beneficial for academia and the community. For instance, a university might face external pressure from local governments to focus on pressing community issues, such as public health, while internally, leadership may prioritise high-impact publications. These types of influences can affect ideas on engaged scholarship, such as the pursuit of health-related research grants, which link back to supporting local needs, and this could lead to increased institutional reputation and the achievement of community-based goals.

The second ring highlights the three core functions within higher education i.e. research, teaching, and outreach. The idea presented here is that engaged scholarship is at its most powerful with the integration of these traditionally separate areas, creating synergy (Franz, 2009). If you took the example of social entrepreneurship, you could weave together the different strands and create something more powerful. Research could be conducted about social enterprises in the community, and the barriers and opportunities that they are confronted by. The insights from the research could then be integrated into the classroom, through case studies, where students could analyse and critique real life scenarios bringing together theoretical understanding with practical application. You could even have the students directly involved with social enterprises as consultants to work on business issues, and provide advice across a range of business areas, such as marketing, finance and strategy. This is just one example of the power that comes from an engaged scholarship approach that values and integrates all three key academic areas.

The third ring outlines six specific activities that facilitate engaged scholarship with each one highlighting a different way in which engagement impacts academic and community settings. It emphasises the active, iterative process of how a person would interact with knowledge as an engaged scholar (Franz, 2009). Each activity builds on the previous rings, creating a link between external influences and institutional imperatives to practical actions, these are:

Discover Knowledge

This activity involves identifying gaps in existing knowledge and conducting research to address those gaps. In engaged scholarship, ‘discovering knowledge’ isn’t limited to academic curiosity, it is about uncovering knowledge that has practical relevance for the community or industry. For example, an academic working with local businesses might research consumer trends to help them better understand the markets they operate within. The type of skills most relevant here include inquiry, critical thinking, and data collection, so that academics can develop meaningful research questions, ones that are both academically based and practical. By engaging with real world issues, there is the opportunity to improve their ability to analyse and synthesise information.

Develop Knowledge

This step is about developing knowledge into frameworks, models, or theories with a focus on benefitting both academia and the community. It can be thought of as structuring knowledge, drawing connections between findings, and developing

concepts. For example, a social scientist might develop a social inclusion model using data from marginalised communities. This process, for the academic, requires an ability to think conceptually, apply theoretical insights to real-world contexts, and work across disciplines to develop a more holistic understanding of the area or issue. During this phase of developing knowledge academics improve their adaptability, bringing together theory and practice to generate insights.

Disseminate Knowledge

This phase involves sharing insights and findings with different audiences. This could be academic peers, community stakeholders or policymakers, for instance. There is a move here beyond academic publication where information is tailored to appeal to different audience types. For example, a researcher working in the public health arena might share findings with health organisations, through easy to comprehend reports or leaflets. In this way, the activities help to enhance communication skills, knowledge translation and audience engagement. Development opportunities would include presenting complex information in a clear format and making research accessible for a range of stakeholders.

Change Behaviour

This area is about inspiring action in others, a key component of effective engaged scholarship. There is an opportunity to use the practical applications of research to encourage individuals or organisations to change practices for the better. An academic working with schools, for example, might promote evidence-based teaching methods to improve student engagement. This type of approach would require skills with persuasion, change management, and delivering practical implementation. Through leading behaviour change, academics can learn experientially to implement new practices, generate impact and develop themselves ready for leadership roles.

Change Learning

This area focuses on the relationship between academia and the community for learning and generating mutual knowledge exchange. Academics are known to teach and inform, but they can also broaden their perspectives and learn from community stakeholders. For example, an academic collaborating with local entrepreneurs might learn innovative business practices that challenge conventional academic thinking. This ongoing exchange can help build skills like collaboration, empathy, and reflexivity, as they generate an understanding of the value of diverse perspectives. This helps to

reinforce the importance of lifelong learning and that broadening one's viewpoints is important for development.

Change Condition

This area links to a broader goal of generating lasting change for the betterment of communities and society. Research, in this case, can be used as a foundation to challenge and change larger societal issues, such as poverty or inequality. For instance, an academic studying sustainable agriculture might work with farmers to implement eco-friendly practices. This could be beneficial for the environment and for economic growth. The skills developed here might include project management, community engagement, and evaluation. With a focus on changing conditions academics are able to gain experience in delivering social change.

The six activities, described above, link closely to professional development. Each activity is an opportunity to build and refine skills, such as analysis, communication, adaptability, and practical implementation, though critical thinking, collaboration, and reflexivity cut across each activity. Academics, through an engaged scholarship approach, can develop competencies essential for mastering modern academia and nurture qualities that allow for personal growth in many different areas. In this way, the Franz (2009) model provides a framework that advances individual professional development, broadens the academic's expertise and builds capacity to contribute to both academia and society.

At the centre of the model is the principle of reciprocity i.e. the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between academia and the community. This idea is replicated in other definitions of engaged scholarship (e.g. Boyer, 1996; Hyman et al., 2000; Bruns et al., 2003). With this view, academic and community collaborations should generate shared value and lasting positive outcomes with this type mutually beneficial relationship being mirrored within Aston University's Strategy (Aston University, 2024). For instance, the business school could partner with local small businesses to improve digital marketing strategies, where the businesses benefit from enhanced marketing approaches, and the university gains valuable data and insights for academic publications. This type of partnership, with bi-directional benefits, shows the importance of a balanced exchange of expertise and resources. Together, the rings illustrate how the Franz (2009) model provides a structured approach to engaged scholarship and it highlights the many ways higher education can address community needs.

It is essential to acknowledge, that while the model offers a comprehensive structure, it is not without limitations. A postmodern critique might argue that the Franz model, like similar frameworks by Van de Ven (2007) and Boyer (1996), risks imposing a structured, linear view on what should be a fluid, context-sensitive process. Postmodern thinkers (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Lyotard, 1979) would question whether this model risks simplifying the complexity of academic experiences. Given that postmodernism emphasises power dynamics, institutional discourses and social contexts, the model could be accused of not directly addressing these areas. For instance, how institutional metrics, or national ones (like REF, TEF and KEF), could influence how this model operates in practice. However, despite these critiques, this remains highly useful for the research purposes of this study. Its holistic perspective, while not addressing some postmodern critiques, does allow for an exploration of the competing priorities faced as a modern academic. It offers a base through which research into professional development can be explored, and gives room to consider individual and subjective experiences, with no prescribed route or narrative for success. This model therefore becomes a useful tool to frame research interviews as it helps set flexible boundaries while exploring the lived experience of professional development. There are many forces that influence professional development, and therefore many tangents that can be explored, and while it is important that the conversations are free flowing, they should have some parameters in place. The Franz (2009) Engaged Scholarship Model helps to do this.

Professional Frameworks

Models of engaged scholarship, including those of Franz (Franz, 2009) and Boyer (Boyer, 1996), recognise that the role of an academic includes balancing teaching, research, and knowledge exchange, which link back to the areas being actively measured through REF, TEF and KEF. However, measuring academic success extends further, and includes areas like leadership, civic engagement, management and administration (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006; Boyd and Smith, 2016). Even though the Franz (2009) model gives us a model that is useful to explore the role of a modern academic from an engaged scholarship perspective, the reality is that the range of roles and tasks that academics are being asked to deliver is more complex and difficult to navigate. Skills development remains onerous due to the diversity of skills needed to be successful and the multiple frameworks needed to understand the skills required. At Aston University this complexity is compounded by individual factors that influence both personal and professional development, such as the different contract types, and the multitude of demands that arise from those roles.

For academic staff who are required to master both teaching and research the most relevant frameworks are the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) (Advance HE, 2023) and the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) (Vitae, 2011). The UKPSF has been developed to help individuals, and institutions, deliver excellent learning experiences for students. It is a top-down development process with strict criteria on what constitutes excellence as an educator. The Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF), on the other hand, provides structure for the continuing professional development of those who conduct research, regardless of career stage. The UKPSF, although teaching focused, has embedded itself into the academic community more than any other similar initiative and has been shown to have provided a sense of ownership within that community (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006). Although there is some overlap between the two, they are distinct in what they consider to be the demonstration and attainment of best practice in their respective areas. The existence of at least two different frameworks makes it difficult for those who are, or aspire to be, involved with both. It raises issues for individuals, such as whether one framework is more important than the other, whether it is possible to achieve excellence in both and what support is available to help individuals develop. The complexity is increased when, for instance, there is the need to develop skills to manage a department, coach other staff members, perform a leadership role or take on other administrative responsibilities.

While the UKPSF and RDF provide a good foundation for focussing development activity on areas that relate to some areas of academic performance, the skills needed to perform well in that role are wider ranging and relate to a more general sense of growth and development as both a person and as a professional. For instance, technology-based skills are often essential to deliver teaching, conduct research and act as a gateway to efficiency, self-development and self-guided learning. The pivot from in person teaching, to online teaching, due to the Coronavirus (Covid) pandemic highlighted that many staff did not have the technical knowledge or skills to effectively deliver teaching online (König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch, 2020; Ma *et al.*, 2021). This potentially shows a lack of foresight, not about Covid per se, but moving the academic skill set to be more digitally focused. The same could probably be said about coaching, mentoring and managing others. Management roles are often a necessary step if one is to move up the ranks within HE, however, academic staff are not often developed in ways to provide them with those skills sets. In fact, a recent report on leadership and management suggests that within HE there seems to be a '…*cultural aversion to acknowledging the existence, and by extension the utility, of leadership and management*' (Hyde and O'Regan, 2023, p. 53). Additionally, the resources that are made

available for staff to utilise (for self-improvement, for formal delivery or for communities of practice) are often poor, or underdeveloped. While it has been shown how organisational culture and climate can influence development, so too can the personality and context of individuals. Motivation, dedication, enthusiasm, and other factors and traits, contribute towards a successful, or unsuccessful, development journey. On top of that, it has also been shown that the experiences gained by an academic staff member directly affects their development. For instance, the level of experience (e.g. early career, mid-career or long serving) can affect how an individual learns from colleagues (Van Waes *et al.*, 2016) and where a person gained experience (e.g. private sector, public sector, third sector, HE, self-employment, etc) can also influence professional development and the way the job is performed. It is these types of findings that reinforce the need for a postmodern perspective so that greater focus is placed on the individual and their own context.

Individual Perspectives and Context

Identity

Identity can be seen as a multifaceted and dynamic construct (Gee, 2000; Henkel, 2005; Archer, 2008). It is shaped by an individual's evolving roles, values and interactions within their environment. In academia, the immediate pressures of teaching, research, and engagement, and broader organisational and national pressures, make identity challenging to define and difficult to sustain. A postmodern perspective helps us to question the traditional fixed notions of identity as academics are rarely just a 'teacher' or a 'researcher'. The identity of an academic is often a blend of roles, and this can include administrator, mentor, friend, ally and many more. These roles shift and mutate as the world around the individual, and the context they find themselves in, whether personal, institutional or societal, also shift and mutate. Theorising about the 'blended professional' (Whitchurch, 2009) suggests that academics are required to work across multiple domains, where the boundaries that traditionally existed are now blurred. An academic, might need to balance a leadership role, engage with policy, conduct research, manage colleagues and deliver high quality teaching. This concept of blended professional demonstrates the fluidity and construction of academic identity. Individuals are continuously negotiating and redefining themselves and the role they operate within. The ability to develop multiple identities, and to shift between these, challenges more traditional notions of academic career progression and shows the importance of adaptation and contextual appreciation.

Another key area to think about when discussing the idea of identity formation in academics is through the writings around reflexivity. Reflexivity was alluded to in the earlier discussion around the Franz (2009) model, however, it is important to explore this concept further. Margaret Archer (Archer, 2007) suggests that reflexivity is the mental process through which individuals reflect upon themselves and their social circumstances. It is a process involving internal dialogue, where self-questioning, assessment and evaluation are important, and this allows the individual to respond and adapt to social structures and helps them shape and reshape their identity. Through self-awareness and critical reflection, the individual understands the different roles they perform better and to make adjustments based on their context. For an academic, this might involve balancing, and placing different weightings on, research, teaching, engagement and administration against their own aspirations, goals and values. For Archer, there are four types of reflexivity that could be considered as relevant, these are:

> **Autonomous reflexivity:** this could be seen in those that thrive on independent research and discovery, that they drive their career, and their own personal goals and aspirations, even when this might conflict with the goals of the institution and its metrics.
>
> **Communicative reflexivity:** this could be seen to describe academics who want to get feedback from others, maybe peers, mentors or other opinions that they value. They would use this feedback to shape and influence their professional development decisions.
>
> **Meta-reflexive academics:** this could be seen in academics who question the systems they work within, there is a high degree of critical analysis evident here, where they would pick apart the REF, TEF, KEF, managerial expectations and other factors as they strive to find meaning in their work beyond institutional pressures.
>
> **Fractured reflexivity:** this could be seen when the demands of the role become disorientating. This would be the academic feel torn between the various pressures they are under, a sense of inner conflict.

The ability for academics to understand and use reflexivity is a critical component of role evolution. The demands placed on the individual are constantly in flux, to greater or lesser

extents, and by engaging in reflective practices they can better navigate and negotiate how their identity interacts with personal aspirations and institutional expectations.

Postmodernists (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Lyotard, 1979; Foucault and Gordon, 1980) would suggest that identity is not fixed, rather, it is a socially constructed and context-dependent. You can see the alignment between this view and the challenges that academics face. Academics will need to continuously reshape their professional identity to the pressures and contexts around them. These socially constructed norms shape how individuals perform their roles but also how they are perceived in the institution. Gendered expectations, such as those suggested by Baxter (Baxter, 2003), could influence who is considered 'natural' for leadership roles or to undertake pastoral care for students, even staff. The construction of academic identity, particularly for marginalised groups, is often influenced by institutional and societal norms. For instance, marginalised academics, such as women, racial minorities, those in the LGBTQ+ community, often have expectations placed on them around invisible labour, such as diversity work or mentoring underrepresented students (Griffin and Reddick, 2011; Ahmed, 2012). These types of expectations are rarely rewarded by institutions. Women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines often feel the need to prove their expertise in these traditionally male-dominated fields (Dasgupta and Stout, 2014). This affects how they construct their professional identity, such as navigating systemic bias, managing perceptions or striving to gain legitimacy. These norms and influences, in turn, reinforce traditional power structures. Postmodernism suggests that academic identity is not consistent or unified, rather, it is likely that academics experience fragmented identities, ones they move between depending on context (Henkel, 2005; Clarke, Hyde and Drennan, 2013). This can lead to conflict between identities, frustration and a sense of inauthenticity. Given the wide scope of roles and demands an academic must fulfil, it seems likely this is difficult to manage. However, reflexivity can help resolve some, if not all, of that conflict-based tension that comes from fractured identities, and it helps individuals to understand, and explore, how power dynamics (of the institution and society) affect them personally.

Learning Theories and Developmental Models

The way people learn and develop as individuals is important when considering academic professional development. Learning theories offer important insights into these processes, including how academics acquire new knowledge, skills and professional identities. Constructivist based theories of learning suggest that individuals actively build knowledge

through personal experiences and interactions with the world around them. Lev Vygotsky developed the idea of social constructivism (Veer and Valsiner, 1991; Daniels, 1996). In this theory there was an emphasis on social interaction and cultural context being important for learning to occur. He suggested that learning is co-constructed through interaction with others, through dialogue and collaboration, rather than just absorbed from an external source. In academia, this theory holds weight, as learning often happens in collaboration with peers, mentors and with students. Professional growth and development, from a constructivist viewpoint, does not take place through isolation, rather, there is a continuous process of interaction, both within the academic context and society more generally. For instance, an academic might improve their ability to teach through reflective processes, receiving feedback from colleagues and being able to react and adapt to the needs of students. This aligns with the postmodern critique of fixed identities. Here, learning and development is seen as continual and evolving rather than based around static achievements. An important element of Vygotsky's theorising was what he described as the zone of proximal development (Veer and Valsiner, 1991; Daniels, 1996). It refers to the gap between what can be achieved by an individual independently versus what can be achieved alongside a more knowledgeable other, such as a mentor or peer. By involving others, and gaining guidance, feedback and support, individuals can expand their capabilities and enhance their professional development.

Within academia, another important model to consider, is that of experiential learning. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, Alice and Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 2015) is based around the idea that learning occurs through a continuous cycle. In this model, individuals can learn by doing, reflecting on their experience, forming abstract concepts and then testing these concepts in new situations. If we think about how an academic might develop, we could think about those stages in the following way:

> **Concrete Experience**: Engaging in new experience, such as teaching a class or performing at an interview
>
> **Reflective Observation**: Reflect on the experience, analysing what worked and what didn't work

Abstract Conceptualisation: Forming new strategies or ideas based on the reflection, such as modifying teaching techniques or finding new ways to connect with audiences

Active Experimentation: Testing these new strategies in future situations, such as trying different pedagogical approaches in the next term or conducting interviews with a different style or approach

In academia, the way academics develop is often experiential, through their classroom activities, research, administrative roles and much more. There are some key elements within this theory that align well with postmodernism, such as the focus on the experiences of the individual and these will differ person to person and is a subjective process of understanding and reflecting. With reflection at the core of the model this also links well with postmodern ideas on reflexivity, and the cyclical nature demonstrates that meaning and knowledge are continually shifting and being reinterpreted. A postmodern critique of this theory might suggest that it is too highly structured, and that progression is linear. Learning does not always happen in a neat, repetitive loop and this type of model could be considered too rigid. Though it is possible to think about the stages as being more fluid, and to consider the contextual factors that influence how people effectively move around the cycle in the workplace. For instance, the reflective observation stage would link well to ideas of deconstruction, and it would allow the learner to critically analyse and challenge dominant narratives and assumptions in their experience.

The concepts of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) explain how learning takes place in social and cultural contexts, and that learning does not occur in isolation, rather, it is directly linked to the context in which it happens. Learning is ‘situated’ in the sense that it is embedded in the social and physical environment in which individuals participate. It is also contextual, as it is done through participation and is a social process. Lave and Wanger (1991) discuss legitimate peripheral participation which links to how newcomers, over time, become experienced members of a community. This type of view contrasts with more traditional views of learning i.e. ones based around fixed, formal curricula or that learning is solely about taking onboard new facts or skills.

A key idea that Wenger went on to explore further (Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022) are communities of practice; groups of people who share common interests or a profession. Newcomers interact with more experienced member of the group, and through

their interaction, they come to develop new skills, knowledge and behaviours that define membership in the community. This theorising is relevant to professional development as expertise, in this context, is much more than accumulating knowledge. It is about engagement with others, negotiating roles and building relationships within professional communities. It emphasises that professional development is a lifelong process, with academics moving between communities, learning new practices and adapting to changing professional contexts, and it links to the value of mentoring and peer learning. These ideas clearly resonate with postmodern views where knowledge is not seen as universal, rather it is context dependent and constructed through social interaction. The stages of participation that Lave and Wenger talk about links to notions of multiple identities, fluid development and contextually specific interactions. Though a full postmodern critique of communities of practice would need to delve into understanding the power dynamics involved in learning within a community (Foucault, 1972, 1977). For instance, who decides the norms of the community and who defines what constitutes expertise or full participation? Is it really the community, or are there other forces at play?

The constructivist and experiential approaches mentioned above highlight the active role of the learner and the part they play in shaping their own development. This is a contrast to more traditional approaches to learning, such as behavioural or cognitive based development. Behaviourism, for instance, focusses on observable behaviours, rather than internal thought processes. Learning, when viewed in this way, is the result of conditioning. B.F. Skinner, one of the most influential behaviourists, developed the idea of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953). This is where an individual's behaviour is shaped through positive or negative reinforcement. Learning here is conditioning, essentially how an individual responds to stimuli, and this view ignores, or at least downplays, mental processes such as thoughts, reflection and emotions. This mechanistic view clashes with postmodern theorising, as it reduces the ideas around learning to simple cause and effect. It also ignores any social aspects of learning, and indeed cultural factors, that could help to shape learning.

Cognitive theories of learning contrast with behaviourism as they focus on internal mental processes i.e. how individuals acquire, process, store and recall information. In this field, learning is framed as cognitive development, the generation of mental frameworks or schemas. Individuals acquire and assimilate new information, and this is added into existing mental structures. Piaget, for instance, was keen to emphasise the different and distinct stages learners go through in their development (Flavell and Piaget, 1963; Piaget, Gruber

and Vonèche, 1977). Again, much like behaviourism, a postmodern view of the cognitive theories of learning would critique their structuralist approach and that there are fixed universal stages of development. Much like behavioural approaches, the cognitive theorising, particularly early theories, focuses on the individual in isolation of those social or cultural influences around them.

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is the process where individuals take control of their own learning journeys. In the context of professional development, it is possible to think about areas like the identification of learning needs, setting personal goals, finding the right resources for learning and the evaluation of progress (Knowles, 1975). Unlike the areas mentioned above, whether structured professional development initiatives, or collaborative learning environments, self-directed learning relies on the individual's initiative, motivation and autonomy. This approach aligns well with the realities of a modern academic where they operate in fragmented roles balancing multiple demands, such as teaching, research, engagement and administration. Self-initiative is crucial for driving development, particularly where the pressures like REF, TEF, KEF, and institutional objectives are increasing, therefore it is important for academics to be able to navigate these expectations independently (Candy, 1991; McInnis, 1999). Self-directed learning offers a pathway for development that empowers individuals to pursue their interests and personal growth, reducing reliance on development methods designed primarily to meet institutional or national demands.

One of the key components of self-directed learning is the motivation to learn and develop. A useful theory to think about here is that of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2018, 2020), where it is suggested that individuals are most motivated when they have autonomy, competence and relatedness. Academics who engage in self-directed learning might do so out of a desire for intellectual autonomy. This may be to explore areas outside of what the institution would consider important, or it might be to experiment with new teaching methodologies that deviate from more traditional and established practices. It is easy to see how the desire for autonomy might drive individuals to attend conferences, seek out mentorship opportunities or engage in independent study. However, if we think about this from a postmodern perspective, the area of autonomy could be questioned – how much autonomy do academics really have to shape their own learning?

If we link back to the work of Foucault (Foucault, 1972, 1977), we can consider power to operate in subtle ways, and self-directed learning might be influenced by institutional constraints, such as time, resources, support and encouragement. These could potentially shape what types of learning are considered legitimate or necessary. An academic might feel it necessary to direct learning more towards institutional goals, such as publishing in high impact journals, than being given the autonomy to follow their own developmental interests. While self-directed learning sounds like it would be autonomous, there are underlying invisible forces and power dynamics that can shape those opportunities. It has been suggested that self-directed learners, by trying to balance personal aspiration and institutional demands, may suffer burnout and further fragmentation of their identities when goals are in conflict. Reflexivity (Archer, 2007) is crucial here as a pathway for reflection and being able to continually shape and mould these competing forces for the individuals learning journey.

Exploring Academic Professional Development Further

One of the more traditional long-standing tools used for professional development has been the peer review of teaching (Byrne, Brown and Challen, 2010; Smailes, 2020). Traditionally, this is where peers evaluate sessions delivered by an individual, as a teacher or lecturer, and the feedback is used to enhance their teaching practices or to develop new skills as recognised areas of teaching excellence. However, Smailes (2020) identified three distinct types of peer review: evaluative, developmental and collaborative. The evaluative model links review with performance and the developmental type focuses on quality improvement. Collaborative, however, is potentially the best model as it is based on open and shared experience of enhancement and scholarship. Smailes (2020), when talking about this type of collaboration, describes it as peer support, and argues that this form of peer support minimises the risks involved with observation-based peer review processes and that support should extend past peer observation to be truly effective. The idea of collaboration based support is shared in other research, for instance, Sprott suggests that time and space for collaboration is a key factor in academic development (Sprott, 2019) and that formalised discussion groups can help an individual develop through the sharing of work ideas, discussing dilemmas and asking questions. Other research has found that conversations between colleagues has a distinct role in shaping and improving teaching practice as well as helping to manage teaching workload (Thomson and Trigwell, 2018). It is interesting to note

that mid-career academics can often be at a disadvantage. Firstly, professional development programmes are not tailored to their particular needs (Thomson and Trigwell, 2018), and secondly, how they learn is qualitatively different from novice or senior level academics (Van Waes *et al.*, 2016). It seems likely that mid-career academics have the most to gain from conversations about professional development with colleagues and it would be interesting to see if this was a theme that was prevalent within this research.

Peer support and collaboration can come from relationships with colleagues outside of the individual's own organisation, as well as those within (Sprott, 2019). Building relationships with scholars who can challenge assumptions, and the status quo, are particularly important. This is something more easily achieved when the challenger is based outside of an individual's host environment. The challenger can more effectively encourage the person to ask questions, and reveal thinking patterns, that would generally be discouraged and thought of as taboo (Sprott, 2019). However, the skills to successfully build external relationships, and to network effectively, are not necessarily taught to academics. For instance, doctoral research is often solitary work, which can be isolating and does not encourage engagement with the broader academic community (Wolff and Moser, 2009; Ansmann *et al.*, 2014). Many doctoral students do not receive formal training to develop such skills, and are left without guidance and support to develop these skills independently (Toomey, 2022). Many teaching professionals, when questioned, actually felt their development was focussed on how to follow rules effectively rather than becoming better at their jobs (Boston Consulting Group, 2014). This ties into the findings of Koellner and Jacobs as they believed it was possible to distinguish between two different types of professional development: specified and adaptive (Koellner and Jacobs, 2015). They went on to suggest that specified models (where there is a focus on skill development and knowledge provision) are often preferred by organisations, as they are easier to administer and to measure. Adaptive professional development, that focusses on providing a suite of flexible skills that allows the person to adapt to a situation or context, is harder to measure and therefore less popular. However, this does not mean it is less important, it could be more important.

Another model, which has useful links to professional development, is known as the 'four pillars of practice'. It would be classed as an adaptive model (if we used the description provided by Koellner and Jacobs) and could form the basis of a development programme (Drago-Severson, 2009). The four pillars are *Teaming* (engaging in teams provides the ability to question their own or other people's philosophies and assumptions), *leadership roles* (this offers the opportunity to share power and decision making authority), *collegial*

inquiry (shared exploration and reflection on one's own assumptions, values and convictions as a learning process) and *mentoring* (provides an opportunity to broaden perspectives, examine assumptions and share expertise toward the support of an individual's growth). A development programme that took account of all four pillars could almost certainly lead to longer term, peer and institution supported, development opportunities. However, McInnis believes that 'self-initiative' is one of the most important triggers for developing improved teaching practices (Mcinnis, 2000). This may extend to other aspects of academic professional development, and it is noticeable that, in the Drago-Severson model, these types of individual traits do not factor. For McInnis, development is more about a person's motivation and desire to develop regardless of the system put in place to help them. Others have also identified aspects of the individual that could affect professional development, such as the effect of emotion and trust on deciding to engage in a peer support process (Smailes, 2020). Building an element of choice into professional development schemes, as well as running initiatives over longer periods of time, can also increase engagement and yield more positive results (De Rijdt *et al.*, 2013; Bell and Mladenovic, 2015; Smailes, 2020). Though it is also noted that regardless of how well professional development schemes have been curated there will always be a minority of staff that do not engage (Smailes, 2020).

Chapter Summary

Many questions remain around the professional development of academics in HE. It seems that traditionally the development of academic staff is driven from the top down primarily. The increased use of metrics has exacerbated this. There is little research that takes account of the experiences, needs or reflections of the academic as an individual in relation to their professional development. There is an interesting tension here between what the University views as important versus what an individual views as important. There may be some overlap, but they would often be different. In fact, as far back as 1988, it was suggested by Darling-Hammond that policy makers and educational leaders, when talking about teachers, proposed that the professional teacher is 'one who does things right rather than one who does the right things' (Darling-Hammond, 1988, p.61). The same could be said of academics in HE in general. It would be interesting to test whether becoming the best educator, or the best researcher, would naturally translate to hitting the targets that the University, or the Government, deem as most important. There is pressure on academics to do what the administration dictates rather than simply trying to do, what they believe, are the right things. Further investigation into academic views on professional development are needed at the individual level, particularly in the context of an environment that is

increasingly metric, and analysis driven. This research will reveal what is important to individuals when considering their own professional development journey. It will take into account their previous experiences, contract type and career level while framed within the Franz engaged scholarship model (Franz, 2009).

3. Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides an in-depth explanation of the methodological choices and philosophical foundations that guide this study. It begins with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpin the research, with a particular emphasis on relativism and interpretivism within a postmodern framework. The chapter then explores how Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was selected as the primary analytical method and outlines the research design, including the development of research questions and participant boundaries.

The chapter also highlights the importance of reflexivity in the research process, particularly given the researcher's dual role as both staff member and academic. The discussion of data collection methods, including the use of semi-structured interviews, details how participants' narratives were co-constructed with the researcher to uncover themes related to professional development. This chapter concludes with a comprehensive account of the ethical considerations that guided the study, aligning the ethical framework with the postmodern and reflexive principles at the core of this research.

Introduction

Ontology is the name of a critical area of philosophy that addresses the nature of reality and how we interpret it (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023). Different ontological perspectives offer varying views on what constitutes reality. For example, realism posits that reality exists independently of human perception, while idealism suggests that reality is a mental construct. Empiricism emphasises that reality is known through sensory experience and observation, whereas constructivism argues that reality is shaped by social interaction and individual factors, such as knowledge, experience and mental frameworks (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023). This study is grounded in relativism, which holds that reality is subjective, context-bound, and multiple. Relativism aligns closely with postmodernism, emphasising individual experiences and the coexistence of multiple realities (Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1979; Foucault and Gordon, 1980; Foucault,

1990). This ontological stance is foundational to the study, as it informs all aspects of the research design, the role of the researcher as both investigator and interpreter, and how the findings will be reported. Understanding this ontological foundation is essential, as it guides the exploration of diverse perspectives in professional development and shapes the study's methodological approach.

In terms of my research, and how I view the world, this has changed and evolved over time. Given the type of training and qualifications I have gained previously (see Reflexivity Statement, p.11), it was put to me that a realist approach was the type of position I should be taking for research. In psychology, this was particularly evident as it is grounded in the ideas that were referred to earlier, those from The Enlightenment and what we know as Modernism. This theorising is based on the idea that there is a singular objective truth, and the job of the researcher is to keep trying to gather evidence that builds up, and on, our understanding of that truth. As my career has progressed, and I have developed as a person over time, my ability to see past the implicit biases inherent in the systems within which I studied improved.

The way I see the world aligns much more closely with relativist viewpoints and it feels liberating to be able to explore this further. Relativism (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023) allows me to focus on the thoughts and perceptions of individuals, of understanding individual stories and interpreting what they tell me, particularly their individual context and the things that surround them, such as institutions and society. By listening to the stories and comments of colleagues within Aston University I can understand how they perceive professional development, what it means to them, how they might engage with it, and what is important to make it successful for them as individuals. Each person has their own story to tell, and through a relativist ontology I was able to explore these stories and understand their own truth. Professional development, through this lens, does not have a single ideal endpoint, rather it is an exploration of all the different ways that professional development can be viewed and through those stories we can understand the depth and variety of the ways colleagues perceive and pursue professional development.

Epistemology and Postmodernism

Related to the broad approaches towards understanding reality inherent in ontology, is what is termed *epistemology*. Epistemology refers to the way we understand knowledge;

essentially, it is about how we come to know things (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023). There is a direct link between one's ontological view and how that influences the nature of how we explore and discover new knowledge. For instance, those who hold up *positivism* as the most useful epistemological approach would suggest that knowledge is gained through objective observation and measurement. Reality, in this view, is seen as stable, observable, and measurable, and the goal of research is to uncover generalisable truths or laws. This usually takes the form of *quantitative research*, where hypotheses are generated and tested, and where statistical analysis establishes causality or correlation.

Post-Positivism, on the other hand, accepts that reality can only be known imperfectly, as all observation is fallible (Flick, 2023). It recognises that bias could influence research but aims to minimise this through rigorous, scientific methods. It is a way of conducting research that tries to balance objectivity with an acknowledgment of research bias. Both approaches are grounded in the belief that there is an objective reality or truth, which can be known, at least partially, through research.

This study is grounded in *interpretivism*. This school of thought suggests that knowledge is constructed through human interpretation of the world (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023). It is the job of the researcher to understand the meanings and interpretations that individuals give to their experiences. Interpretivism usually reveals itself in *qualitative research* methods, such as interviews, focus groups, ethnography, or other systems where the goal is to understand the subjective meanings that individuals, or indeed groups, give to phenomena.

Epistemology in the Context of Postmodernism

Building on the ontological foundation of relativism, the epistemological stance of this study is interpretivism, which closely aligns with postmodernism's emphasis on the multiplicity and subjectivity of knowledge. Postmodernism critiques the positivist and post-positivist epistemologies for assuming that knowledge can be objective, neutral, or universal. Instead, postmodern thinkers, such as Michel Foucault (1972, 1977), argue that all knowledge is socially constructed and deeply influenced by power relations. This study, by adopting an interpretivist stance, seeks to uncover the subjective experiences of academics, acknowledging that each individual constructs their own knowledge based on their personal, institutional, and societal contexts.

Interpretivism aligns with postmodernism in its rejection of the notion that research can uncover a single, objective truth. Just as postmodernism rejects grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979), interpretivism rejects the idea that there is one correct way to understand phenomena. Instead, knowledge is viewed as fragmented, context-dependent, and shaped by the unique perspectives of individuals. This is particularly important in the context of professional development in academia, where each academic's experience is shaped by their specific career path, institutional pressures, and personal aspirations. The multiplicity of experiences that inform professional development underscores the relativist and postmodern understanding that knowledge is situated and contingent, rather than fixed or universal.

Moreover, the postmodern critique of power and discourse, as articulated by Foucault, plays a key role in understanding how knowledge is produced and validated. In the context of this study, the knowledge that academics hold about their professional development is not neutral or detached from power structures. It is shaped by institutional discourses, such as those imposed by frameworks like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) or the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which govern academic priorities and influence the kinds of development opportunities that are available or valued. Through an interpretivist approach, this study seeks to explore how these power dynamics influence individual experiences of professional development, while also acknowledging that each individual's understanding is shaped by their unique social and institutional context.

Reflexivity in Interpretivist and Postmodern Research

In an interpretivist and postmodern epistemology, the researcher is not a passive observer but an active participant in the co-construction of knowledge. This requires *reflexivity*—the acknowledgment that the researcher's own background, biases, and perspectives inevitably influence the research process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Archer, 2007). In this study, my previous training in psychology, which leaned toward a more realist and positivist view of knowledge, contrasts with my current relativist, interpretivist perspective. This shift in epistemological stance is not merely academic; it reflects a personal journey in understanding how knowledge is formed, challenged, and interpreted. Postmodernism encourages this reflexive approach, where the researcher continuously questions their role and the power dynamics inherent in the research process.

By grounding this study in interpretivism, I recognise that my role is not to uncover an objective reality but to engage with the subjective realities constructed by the academics I interview. Each story, each perspective, provides a piece of the complex puzzle of academic professional development. The postmodern rejection of a singular truth complements this approach, allowing for an exploration of the diverse, and at times contradictory, experiences that shape professional development in academia. This reflexive stance also acknowledges the influence of institutional pressures—such as the demands of REF, TEF, and KEF—on both the participants' and the researcher's perceptions of professional development.

Knowledge and Power Dynamics

In line with postmodern critique, it is essential to examine how knowledge is not just constructed but also shaped by *power dynamics*. As Foucault (1977) explains, power is not always coercive or overt but often operates through institutions and societal norms. In the context of this study, power dynamics influence which forms of professional development are valued and supported within HE institutions. The structures that govern academic work, such as performance metrics, departmental priorities, and resource allocation, shape not only the opportunities available to academics but also their perceptions of what counts as valid or valuable professional development.

By adopting an interpretivist approach, this study aims to uncover how power relations shape the ways in which academics engage with their professional development, and how they navigate the tensions between personal aspirations and institutional expectations. From a postmodern perspective, the act of deconstructing these institutional narratives is crucial for understanding how individual academics make sense of, and challenge, the constraints they face. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of professional development—one that accounts for the complex, often conflicting, demands placed on academics by their institutions, society, and their own career aspirations.

Research Framework

The research will explore individual accounts of developmental needs, seeking to understand how past experiences contribute toward professional development and identify themes that can aid future staff development approaches. It adopts an inductive, bottom-up view of professional development from the academic perspective, emphasising the fluid,

subjective nature of academic identity and growth. The following main research question (MRQ) and sub-research questions (SRQ) will guide the exploration:

MRQ1: How do academic staff perceive their own professional development?
SRQ1: How does the person's understanding of external regulations / requirements shape an individual's professional development, either directly or indirectly?
SRQ2: What tensions exist between the delivery of teaching and research?
SRQ3: How does work experience, gained from outside HE, influence professional development?
SRQ4: How does the experience level of academic staff influence professional development?

These questions serve as a framework to navigate the exploration of lived experiences, shaped by the theories and concepts discussed in the literature review. Given the diverse and fluid nature of personal and professional experiences, the research process will prioritise providing participants with the space and time to reflect on and articulate their understanding of professional development. Through dialogue, the research will engage in the co-construction and deconstruction of meaning, ensuring that participants' experiences and insights are central to uncovering new perspectives on academic development.

Participation Boundaries

The participants in this study are drawn from academic staff within the College of Business and Social Sciences (BSS) at Aston University. While there are three Colleges within the university, focusing on one College allows for a more consistent exploration of culture and climate across participants. This consistency enables a more refined exploration of professional development experiences, while still recognising the diversity of perspectives that exist across the three distinct Schools within the College. The intention here is not to present a 'sample' in a quantitative sense but to define the boundaries within which participants' experiences are being contextualised.

The boundaries for participation are focused on academic staff who hold teaching and research (T&R) contracts. This group faces a particularly complex set of professional

expectations, as they must balance the demands of both teaching and research. These competing priorities provide a rich context for examining how individual academics navigate their professional development. At the time the research was conducted T&R contracts make up approximately 50% of the academic staff within the college (171 individuals). Although teaching-only (40%, or 137 individuals) and research-only (10%, or 34 individuals) contracts also form part of the academic population, the emphasis on dual responsibilities makes the T&R group particularly relevant for this exploration of professional growth, tensions, and identity formation.

Figure 2. Distribution of T&R staff in BSS by age group and gender

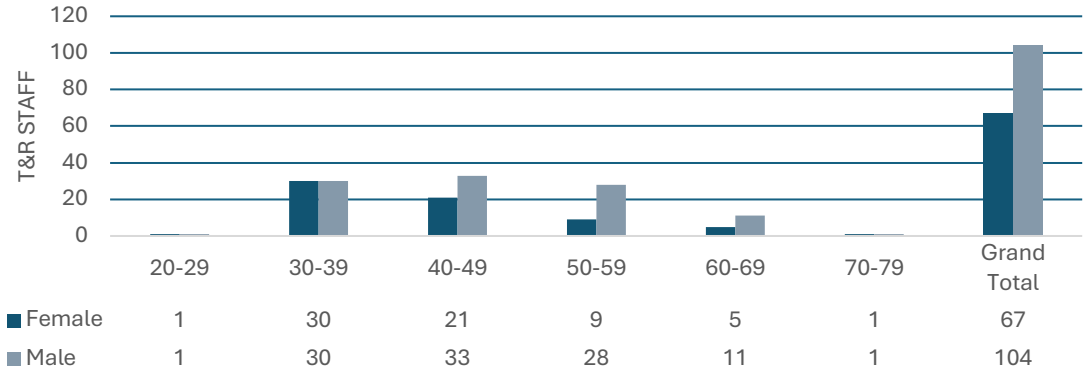
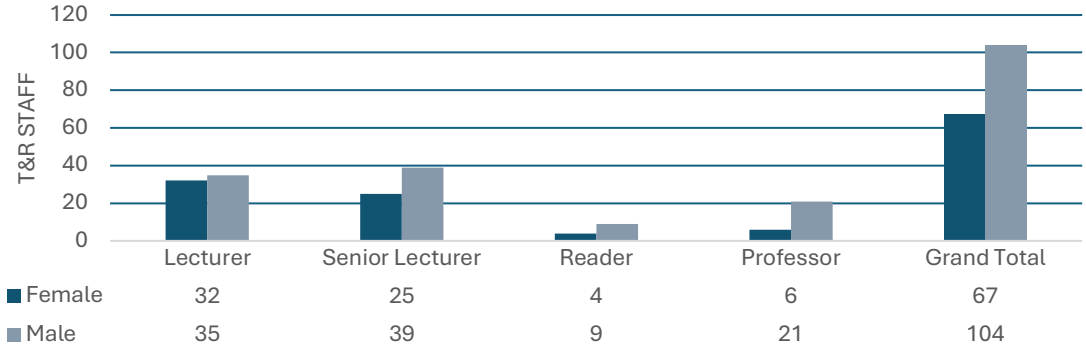


Figure 3. Distribution of T&R staff in BSS by career stage and gender



Considering power, gender, and career stage

The distribution of academic staff across gender and career stages presents additional layers of complexity, which must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. As the data shows, there are significant gender disparities, particularly in the higher academic ranks, where male academics become more dominant in senior positions. This gender

imbalance raises questions about how professional development opportunities, career progression, and mentorship might be experienced differently by women compared to men. The unequal gender distribution at more senior levels could indicate underlying power structures within the institution, or more broadly, that shape who has access to particular development opportunities (Foucault, 1977, 1990; Acker, 1990; Ahmed, 2012).

Moreover, the diversity in career stages (Early, Mid and Senior) provides important context. Each career stage brings with it different experiences, challenges, and developmental needs. For example, early-career academics may focus more on building their research portfolios and developing their teaching practice, whereas more senior staff may be navigating leadership roles or administrative duties. These varying stages of academic life are essential to understanding the diverse pressures and expectations placed upon individuals, which in turn affect their professional development journeys.

The study included 19 participants from the College at varied career stages. The sample comprised 12 male and 7 female participants, representing Aston Business School (11 participants), the School of Social Science and Humanities (6 participants), and the School of Law (2 participants). Career stages were well-represented, with 9 participants at the mid-career stage, 7 in senior career roles, and 3 in early career positions. Age diversity was also evident, with most participants aged 35-54 years (13 participants), while others ranged from 25-34 (1 participant), 55-64 (4 participants), and 65-74 (1 participant). This composition allowed for an in-depth exploration of perspectives across College disciplines, career trajectories, and life stages.

Power dynamics and reflexivity

It is important to note that, as a member of staff conducting research within my own institution, the power dynamics of my position may influence who chooses to participate in this study and what they feel comfortable sharing (Berger, 2015). This positionality is particularly relevant when considering how hierarchical structures within the university may affect the openness of participants. For instance, junior staff may feel hesitant to voice criticisms or concerns, especially if they perceive that their feedback might be linked to institutional pressures or expectations. Conversely, more senior staff may feel a greater sense of agency or detachment from these concerns.

The reflexive nature of this research means that I, as the researcher, must continually interrogate how my role and relationship with the institution influence the data collection and interpretation processes (Watt, 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2024). This reflexivity extends to acknowledging how gender, career stage, and contract type might shape the narratives I hear and, equally, how my position within the university may shape the narratives I co-construct with participants during interviews.

Shifting from representation to exploration

Rather than attempting to present a 'representative' sample of the academic population, this study seeks to explore the individual experiences of those who come forward. These experiences are not generalisable in a statistical sense (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Clark *et al.*, 2021) but are rich in context, subjective interpretations, and personal meaning. By focusing on T&R staff, we can engage with the tensions and pressures that academics face as they balance the often-conflicting demands of teaching and research and explore how these pressures shape their views on professional development.

The aim here is to deconstruct the notion of a singular 'academic experience' and instead highlight the multiple realities that emerge based on contract type, gender, career stage, and personal history. Through these narratives, we gain insight into the complexities of professional development within the specific institutional context of BSS, while remaining sensitive to the power dynamics and positionality that influence both the participants and me as the researcher.

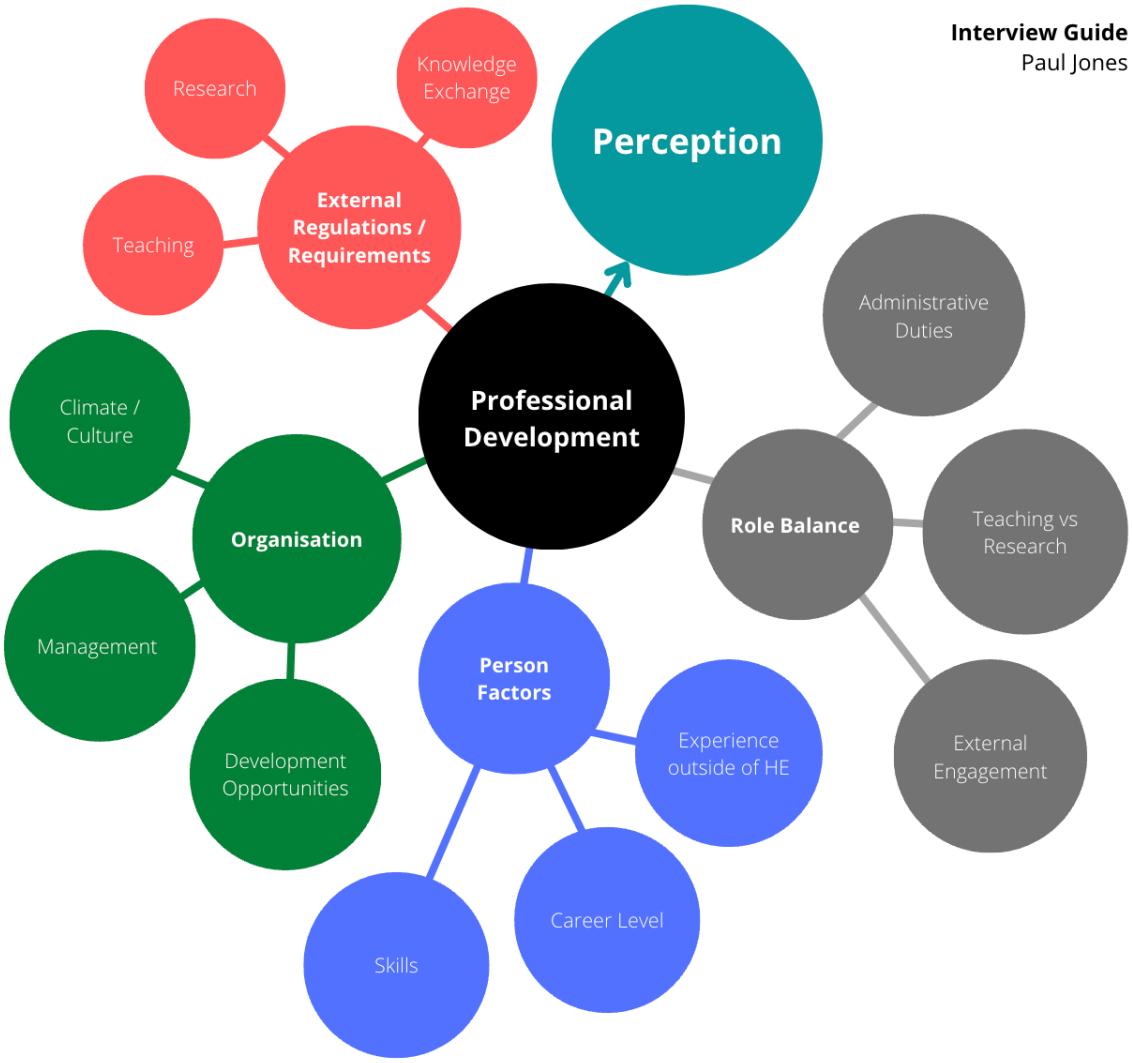
Data Collection

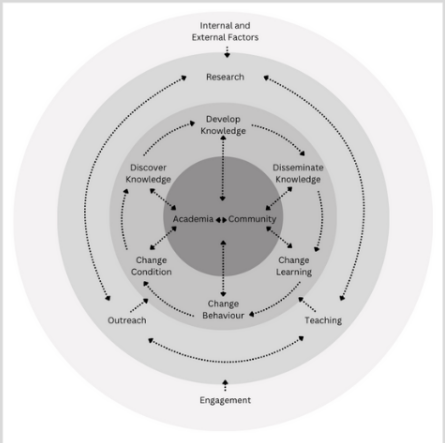
Data collection for this study used semi-structured interviews conducted between a single interviewer (myself) and individual participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they strike a balance between structure and openness, providing enough guidance to ensure critical areas are covered, while still allowing participants to explore their own perspectives and experiences without undue constraints (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023). This flexible structure aligns with the postmodern emphasis on fluidity and subjective meaning-making, which seeks to avoid imposing rigid frameworks or predetermined categories on participants' responses.

Figure 4. Interview guide based on Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship (Franz, 2009)

FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: A POSTMODERN EXPLORATION OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Interview Guide
Paul Jones





Adapted Franz Engaged Scholarship Model (2009)

Research Questions

MRQ1: How do academic staff perceive their own professional development?

SRQ1: How does the person's understanding of external regulations / requirements shape an individual's professional development, either directly or indirectly?

SRQ2: What tensions exist between the delivery of teaching and research?

SRQ3: How does work experience, gained from outside HE, influence professional development?

SRQ4: How does the experience level of academic staff influence professional development?

The interview guide was designed around areas of interest rather than rigid themes. These areas served as prompts for reflection and discussion rather than prescriptive topics, allowing participants to drive the conversation toward what mattered most to them. The Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship (Franz, 2009) was used as a flexible framing tool (see Engaged Scholarship, p.28), helping to steer inquiry into areas such as teaching, research, outreach, and the internal and external influences on professional development. However, participants were encouraged to define and discuss topics based on their personal experiences, keeping the process aligned with the postmodern focus on openness and the co-construction of meaning.

The interview guide was not a rigid script but rather a set of focal points to ensure that key aspects of professional development were touched upon. It helped to keep conversations on track while still offering the participants the freedom to explore unexpected areas and challenge assumptions. This reflects the postmodernist perspective of allowing fragmented, subjective experiences to emerge in their own way, rather than fitting them into predefined narratives.

The main areas of interest explored through the interview process included:

Perception: How participants understand their own professional development and interpret its significance within their career trajectories.

External regulations and requirements: The role of institutional frameworks such as REF, TEF, and KEF, and how they influence professional development, either directly or indirectly.

Role balance: Exploring tensions between teaching, research, administrative duties, and external engagement, and how participants navigate these competing demands.

Organisational factors: How institutional factors, including culture, climate and management structures, shape opportunities for development.

Personal factors: The influence of prior work experience (both within and outside HE), career stage, and individual skills on professional growth.

Interviews were chosen over other methods, such as participant observation, because professional development is a deeply personal and reflective process. It is difficult to capture through direct observation, as much of it involves internal reflection, self-assessment, and long-term planning. Interviews, therefore, provided a more appropriate medium for participants to articulate and reflect upon their experiences (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023). Moreover, this method allows the researcher to engage in a dialogic process, interpreting and interacting with the data as it emerges—a key tenet of the postmodern approach. As a member of staff, with my own set of experiences, identities, and reflections, I was able to use these as additional discussion points to enhance the co-construction of understanding.

To ensure rich, detailed data, each interview was scheduled to last up to 90 minutes. This time frame allowed participants to thoroughly explore the key areas of interest while also ensuring that they had the opportunity to introduce new topics and perspectives. The open-ended nature of the interviews helped to bring out the complexity and contradictions inherent in professional development, revealing the fluid and fragmented identities postmodernism seeks to explore.

Rather than establishing a fixed target for the number of interviews, the literature provides some guidance suggesting that 20 to 30 interviews may offer sufficient depth (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Adler and Adler, 2012; Robinson, 2014). However, in keeping with postmodernist and relativistic principles, this research does not impose a fixed sample size. The focus is on the richness of the data and the depth of each participant's narrative. The aim is to fully understand individual experiences, avoiding an arbitrary cap on the number of interviews that might overlook unique or insightful perspectives. The first 3 interviews served as pilot interviews, which were essential for refining the use of the interview guide and improving questioning techniques (Kvale, 2007; Majid *et al.*, 2017). These pilots allowed for the inclusion of any emergent areas of interest identified by participants, further reinforcing the flexibility inherent in the research process.

Participants were given flexibility to choose their interview settings, whether in person or online, ensuring they felt comfortable and secure in sharing their experiences. Recognising the potential influence of institutional spaces, options included off-campus locations and multiple online platforms (e.g., Teams, Zoom), creating a neutral and open environment. Interviews were recorded using appropriate technology, with robust backup processes in place, and further details on ethical considerations related to recordings are provided in the

ethics section (see Ethical Considerations, p.72). As an insider within the institution, I took deliberate steps to separate my dual roles as researcher and colleague, using the College's central email system for participant recruitment to avoid perceptions of coercion or bias. A more comprehensive discussion of these ethical considerations and their impact on the research process is available in the ethics section (see Ethical Considerations, p.72).

Ultimately, the data collection process was designed to create a dialogic space where participants could explore their professional development on their own terms, free from the constraints of strict pre-established theoretical frameworks. By focusing on areas of interest rather than predetermined themes, the interviews were designed to ensure that participants' voices and experiences guided the research process. This aligns with postmodernism's deconstruction of traditional researcher-participant power hierarchies, allowing for the co-construction of meaning and ensuring that participants' subjective interpretations of their professional development remain central.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

Thematic Analysis (TA) (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2022b; Flick, 2023) is a method often used for analysing qualitative data by developing patterns of meaning. The patterns are generated from a dataset through data familiarisation, data coding and theme development (and revision). It is considered a versatile method, one that is accessible and appropriate across many disciplines. TA is not a singular method, rather, it is a collective term for several similar methods. The shared characteristic is that they develop patterns of meaning from qualitative data. When Braun and Clarke first wrote about their own approach to TA (2006, 2022b) they did not define a specific approach. Over time, their theorising evolved, as the range of orientations, concepts and practices is so wide. Their focus now is on being able to differentiate what they call Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) from other forms of TA.

RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2020, 2022a; Clarke and Braun, 2013) was chosen as the type of analytical style as it aligns well with ideas on postmodernism and it emphasises my role as researcher as being based around the co-construction of knowledge and that my interactions with participants has an influence on them. It recognises that my experiences, reflections and biases interact with and affect participants, this includes how they relate to me, the way they share information with me and that I am an active part of the research, analysis and interpretation process. Being both a colleague and a researcher this form of

analysis gives me the chance to acknowledge power dynamics and the multiple identities that people hold in the workplace. It aligns with my philosophical viewpoint, it takes account of my role as an employee in the organisation, and it dovetails with postmodern critique and deconstruction.

What is RTA?

For Braun and Clarke, a fundamental characteristic of their form of TA was the need to have a researcher who was subjective, situated, aware and inquisitive. The ability to be reflexive, to practice critical reflection, both in terms of practice but also in terms of the research process, was an essential aspect of RTA. They recognise that most psychologists, actually most people in the research field generally, have been developed with a positivist, quantitatively based viewpoint (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Therefore, it is important for those undertaking RTA to align themselves with the notion of 'Big Q'. This is a term used to refer to the use of qualitative tools and techniques within a qualitive paradigm, what the originators of that term describe as 'fully qualitative' (Kidder & Fine, 1987; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The alternative to this is 'small q', which uses qualitative tools and techniques, but within a quantitative paradigm. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggested that the term qualitative sensibility could be used to capture the value, assumptions, orientation and skills needed to conduct RTA, one that aligns with the Big Q approach. For them it comes down to the following ideas, that a researcher engaging in RTA can demonstrate the following:

- Interest in process and meaning rather than a focus on cause and effect
- A critical and inquisitive approach to knowledge and to life generally
- Ability to reflect on cultural context and explore its underlying assumptions
- Ability to listen to and read data actively with an analytic appreciation and focus
- Motivation to understand in a way that appreciates nuance, complexity and contradictory information without shortcuts
- Embraces the idea that knowledge is contextual, that there is no universal truth
- Tolerates a degree of uncertainty or ambiguity

You can see through this list that the principles align well with the ideas and theorising behind this research project. The list resonates strongly with the relativist, interpretivist and postmodern viewpoints that are at the core of this research. There is a focus here on understanding individuals, being active in the understanding and co-construction of

knowledge, being able to embrace uncertainly and complexity and that context plays a part in all our subjective experiences.

One of the warnings that Braun and Clarke (2022c) provide is to avoid 'positivism creep'. They refer to the 'unacknowledged and unreflexive adherence to (post)positivist assumptions, values and norms in qualitative research treating (post)positivist assumptions and values as reflecting universal good practice for all research in an unknowing way.' (Braun and Clarke, 2022c, p. 399). This is a particularly important warning for me, given my training and background. Even though I would position myself as having qualitative sensibility, that my research design is fully aligned with the paradigms I have articulated, I have for many years had positivistic approaches drummed into me, and work with many colleagues who take a positivistic approach. This means I need to be vigilant in the way that I read, reflect and immerse myself in relativist and interpretivist viewpoints, and cleanse myself of past positivist habits. That does not mean I should forget all that I have learnt, in fact, much like the competition between the modern and the postmodern, having a counter point to my ideas and rejuvenated ways of working can be a positive force to aid my development and reflections further.

Research design and RTA

Braun and Clarke (2022b) highlight ten key considerations for research design in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). They note that qualitative research design is not always fully embedded in methodological literature, making it important to set a clear context for this study. In doing so, we ensure that the design is fit for purpose and aligns with the principles of RTA and postmodernism.

> **Multiple Entry Points to Design**: Research design in RTA can be shaped by theoretical, political, or pragmatic considerations. Postmodern approaches emphasise flexibility and a lack of rigid starting points. Whether driven by philosophical assumptions or research questions, design should always prioritise coherence between aims, methods, and theoretical frameworks. In this study, there is strong alignment between my relativist, postmodern orientation and the chosen methods and goals.
>
> **Conceptual Coherence**: Methodological integrity, or conceptual coherence (Clarke and Braun, 2013; Willig, 2021), ensures that research questions, philosophical

foundations, and methods fit together cohesively. This is particularly important for a postmodern analysis, where multiple perspectives and fluidity challenge the idea of a fixed 'truth.' Rather than seeking singular answers, this research explores fragmented, subjective experiences around professional development.

Research Questions Matter: Research questions guide design. In a postmodern context, they are not fixed but evolve as data is collected and analysed. Rather than rigidly seeking specific answers, my research questions encourage an exploration of how participants make sense of their experiences. RTA supports this open-ended approach, allowing questions to shift and mutate as participant narratives are appreciated and interpreted.

Flexibility in Data: RTA imposes few constraints on the type of data that can be collected. Whether interviews, diaries, or other material, the choice of data depends on alignment with the evolving research questions. In this study, while there is a focus on interview for data collection, there is a commitment to exploring multiple realities and capturing varied perspectives, essential to a postmodern approach.

Dataset Composition Flexibility: Data for RTA can vary in scope and depth, with material generated through interviews or sourced from existing texts. The aim is to explore how data reflects the complexity of lived experiences. My study gathers data from diverse academic staff within the College, providing insight into varied identities and professional contexts. This diversity is key to understanding the fragmented experiences of professional development.

Systematic Approach to Data: Despite postmodernism's critique of traditional structures, RTA requires a systematic approach to data collection and transcription to ensure transparency. My study follows a structured process for gathering and transcribing data, providing a robust foundation for exploring subjective experiences without imposing a singular narrative.

Data Size Flexibility: There is no fixed formula for determining the dataset size in RTA. Rather than aiming for saturation—a concept more aligned with positivist research—the focus is on the richness and depth of the data. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2022b) recommendations, this study prioritises gathering data that holds 'information power' by providing insight into varied meanings and experiences.

Data Quality Matters: High-quality data is essential for rich analysis in RTA. In a postmodern framework, data quality is linked to its ability to reflect diverse realities and perspectives. By reviewing initial interviews, I ensured that the data collection process captured meaningful and nuanced insights, allowing for deep, reflexive analysis of professional development.

Avoiding Fixed Dataset Size: Postmodern approaches critique rigid sample sizes. Instead of aiming for a specific number of interviews, the priority is to explore depth and richness. RTA allows the focus to shift from quantity to the richness of each participant's narrative, allowing for a more refined understanding of professional development.

Ethical Thinking: Ethical considerations are central to RTA, particularly in representing participants' voices. In this study, attention is given to the power dynamics inherent in the research process, especially as I am both an insider and a researcher. Ethical engagement means acknowledging the complexities in interpreting participants' stories, particularly in a postmodern context that challenges hierarchical interpretations. Ethical considerations will be maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and the representation of findings.

As illustrated above, there are important considerations central to applying RTA within this research, ensuring that the study design is coherent, ethical, and reflective of postmodernist principles. The flexibility offered by RTA complements the aim of this research: to explore professional development as a fragmented, subjective experience, interpreted through the lens of multiple realities.

The process of RTA

Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022b) suggest that RTA involved a 6 step process. Each step is briefly outlined below with a commentary provided on the process that I adopted, my reflections on the process and how it links to Braun and Clarke's description.

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the dataset

Braun and Clarke (2022b) describe this phase as the process of becoming deeply acquainted with your data, often through immersion. This involves reading and re-reading

the data (or listening to audio recordings) and making notes on initial analytic insights and impressions.

My process:
In this phase, I aimed for full immersion by conducting all the interviews myself. This allowed me to establish a deep connection with the data even before transcription began. Although I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews, I reviewed each transcript manually by comparing it against the original audio recordings. This practice ensured that I could reflect on the subtleties of the conversations, such as tone, pauses, and emphasis—elements crucial in a postmodern inquiry, where every layer of meaning is important.

During this familiarisation, I not only focused on the content but also began to question the power dynamics present in the interviews, reflecting on how my position as a staff member could influence participants' responses. When I reviewed the interview transcripts, I used NVivo as this streamlined the process. It made it easy to add notes, record my initial thoughts to segments of the text and to keep my reflections ordered and link them to different sections. For instance, if a person was particularly enthused about a subject, and I could sense their passion, I would reflect on those types of cues. I would also pay attention to what I was feeling and thinking, and how those contextual factors affected my interpretation of events. It was good to have my own comments and utterances reflected back to me, as I had a further chance to explore the ideas that were generated, both from me and the interviewee, as we co-constructed our understanding of different topic areas. NVivo helped me navigate the large volume of data and allowed me to annotate key areas of interest without losing the flow of my analysis. This immersive process aligned with postmodernist thinking, which stresses the importance of subjective experiences and multiple layers of interpretation.

Phase 2: Coding
Braun and Clarke (2022b) explain that coding is a systematic process of tagging parts of the data that seem interesting, relevant, or meaningful. This phase involves attaching labels (codes) to data that represent singular concepts or meanings, either at the semantic (surface) or latent (underlying) level.

My process:

Coding was one of the more rewarding parts of the analysis. I systematically worked through each interview transcript, coding sections of text that seemed significant, whether they were directly related to the research questions or stood out in other ways. I approached coding in two layers: first, capturing the explicit or semantic content (e.g., specific challenges participants mentioned), and then diving into the latent content. This second layer was where postmodernism became especially relevant as my knowledge of that area allowed me to more effectively recognise underlying power dynamics, institutional influences, and the ways participants' identities were being shaped by external forces such as university policies or societal expectations. This does not mean it put limitations on the way I was able to interpret, appreciate and understand what was being said, but it certainly helped to expand my abilities to recognise deep levels of meaning. As I mentioned in my reflexive statement, the counselling skills I had develop previously helped here, as I was used to being able to not just take on surface level meaning of comments made, but am more skilled at appreciating the underlying meanings, emotions and other cues that make up communication between individuals.

I found the use of NVivo particularly helpful for organising codes systematically. If you were approaching this from a small q perspective, NVivo would be well placed to help with presentation of data, code counting and other forms of reporting or quantitative labelling of qualitative data. However, this process I adopted was far from mechanical and followed Big Q principles. The coding process required me to reflect continuously on the meanings that were being generated by my interaction with the data and my interpretation processes were shifting and evolving on a continual basis. For example, certain phrases that seemed simple on the surface revealed underlying tensions when viewed through a postmodern lens—such as participants' struggles to balance autonomy and institutional pressure. I also revisited previous sections of a transcript, or earlier transcripts, after completing interviews to ensure consistency and to refine my coding process. This iterative approach allowed the coding to evolve, capturing deeper meanings as I became more familiar with the data. This links well with a postmodern take on understanding the ever-evolving nature of people and of the contexts they were within. The metaphor that springs to mind is immersing my feet in ever shifting sand, but the sand felt good between my toes, and I was always able to keep my balance, but I was using different skills and abilities to do so.

Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes

In this phase, Braun and Clarke (2022b) describe how researchers cluster related codes into broader patterns of shared meaning, called themes. It's an active process of constructing themes rather than discovering them as fixed entities.

My process:

For this phase, I used Post-it notes as a physical tool to map out the codes. Each code I had generated was placed on its own Post-it and this allowed me to take a step back and engage with the data visually, clustering related codes into larger groups. The tactile nature of physically moving the Post-its around helped me think more flexibly about the data and allowed my brain to work with it in different ways. While I could look at a longer list of codes on the computer screen, and I could sort the data in different ways (e.g. alphabetically, by creation date or by number of times attached), this seemed too mechanistic.

To truly immerse myself in thinking about the codes, and the ideas behind them, the use of Post-its made the process of generating themes more tactile, dynamic and fluid, which fits well with postmodernism's emphasis on multiple realities and interpretations. I felt more immersed as I was more immersed. I was surrounded by brightly coloured thoughts and concepts; I could move these around and they became a visual aid and mirrored what was in my brain. The codes swirled around my desk just like the ideas swirled around my brain. My immersion made it a much more enjoyable process and one that allowed for more effective interpretation and connection. Using the computer to understand the codes and the way they interacted seemed too hierarchical. The fluid nature of the Post-it notes mirrored the ideas inherent in postmodernism, just like we try to understand the story of individuals, while recognising their context and influences, I wanted to fully understand and consider each code and their relation to others without being influenced by hierarchical structures in the data or the way the system worked.

I did not just group similar ideas; I asked myself deeper questions about the data's hidden meanings. For instance, one emerging theme seemed to centre around the idea of 'conflict between personal and institutional expectations,' which allowed me to explore how participants navigated complex power dynamics within their academic roles. It was important to recognise and link back to areas of concern that Postmodernism wants to tackle e.g. recognising, deconstructing and challenging power dynamics, searching for the voice of the individual which is sometimes masked by their own bias and context, as well as thinking about personal agency and the empowerment of individuals. By using this visual and

interactive method, I was able to approach theme development as an active, creative process, constructing rather than 'finding' themes. This aligns with the idea in RTA that meaning is not passively waiting to be uncovered but is instead constructed through interpretation.

It was clear from my immersion in theme development that there were traces of learning from the workplace, culture, and society that were ingrained in my ways of thinking, and that were influencing my language and understanding of themes. As I initially considered how things interlinked, and I reflected on the process, I could see that my experiences of working around various organisations that were steeped in capitalist ideals, or at the least were based on western thinking, had an influence on my theme development. This took the form of wanting to value things differently here, trying to count things to demonstrate value, rather than focussing on the qualitative nature of the stories. It was tempting to resort to ideas on the strength of connection being based on number of times coded or the number of interviews that codes were referenced in. However, that process allowed my thinking to evolve, for me to develop further as a researcher, and to re-invigorate my thinking about postmodernism and how that linked to the data. That ability to reflect, and to be reflexive, was an important part of the process of theme development. I recognised the influence and place I had in my interpretation and was able to move towards a version of myself that was more authentic and congruent with my inner voice, not listening to the expectations that had been built from different directions over many years.

Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes

This phase involves critically assessing the themes to see if they hold up against the full dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022b) stress the importance of reviewing both coded data and the entire dataset to ensure that the themes capture the most important patterns of meaning.

My process:

When I initially generated themes, I realised that I hadn't fully integrated postmodernist principles into my analysis. The themes I had constructed, while useful, felt somewhat rigid. During the review phase, I went back to the full dataset and challenged my initial interpretations. For example, I questioned whether some of my themes were too broad or simplistic, failing to capture the subtleties of individual experiences. I spent time reflecting on how postmodernist ideas, such as the fluidity of identity and the role of institutional power, could be used to refine these themes. For instance, there was a power that came from

different frameworks, so the context played an important part in professional development, but this was varied. REF was much more powerful in the hold it had over academic staff as opposed to TEF and KEF. This is where you start to be able to work with the nuance of stories, the values people place on things or the value that people do not put on things and yet the organisation does. This is a reason why postmodernism is both useful and necessary: to deconstruct these stories, challenge grand narratives and ask the questions that perhaps no one else, or no other theory will.

This process led me to revise certain themes, making them more specific and reflective of the fragmented, contradictory experiences participants shared. One theme initially labelled ‘professional growth,’ was reworked to better reflect the tension between individual aspirations and institutional demands. This took on a different direction and importance, as there was greater focus on the elements of agency in development, of crafting one’s own journey and understanding the different hats one may wear. The idea of identity, and the shifting nature of it, become more important as I went back to the data and looked at things more critically and in more depth. Postmodernism rejects the notion of fixed identity, and it was clear that the experiences of individuals mirrored ideas around shifting identities and the ability to adapt.

The importance of identity resonated with me on a personal level as I have held a variety of different roles, and I can empathise with those who are trying to understand their sense of self when being challenged by the need for different identities within a T&R role. This has caused me mental pain in the past as I have turned my hand to various situations and contexts, and I could sense physical and mental changes in me as I revisited those experiences. I could feel my chest tighten, and my heart race, as I remembered the feelings of being overwhelmed, and having a task list much longer than the time available. This sense of battling different tasks, identities and challenges takes place on a range of different fronts, including internally, organisationally and culturally. I had to work hard to recognise the feelings, appreciate them and empathise with how others might be feeling in similar situations. This was a useful lesson in being able to connect with others through my own discomforting feelings and emotions.

I was able to appreciate these feelings and recollections as powerful tools in my journey while conducting this research. The strength of connection with the data grew and with it my understanding of it also grew. Like an ever-expanding spider’s web, my ability to recognise and connect different elements became easier, the web became more complex. The

complexity and navigation of the web increased through understanding, engaging with and connecting with the data. As my thinking shifted and evolved, I combined or discarded certain themes as my interpretation changed and my overall interaction with the data evolved. This reflective back-and-forth was a learning opportunity, allowing me to align my analysis more closely with postmodernism's focus on complexity and contradiction.

Phase 5: Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2022b), this phase involves refining each theme's core concept and giving it a clear, informative name. The goal is to ensure that each theme tells a distinct story that contributes to the overall analysis.

My process:

Refining the themes involved diving even deeper into the data to understand what brought various stories together. I realised that my initial theme labels were too descriptive, and I needed to push myself to identify the deeper, conceptual ties between codes. For example, I rephrased one theme from 'organisational culture and climate for development', which had a direct link back to my literature review and a more classical understanding of organisational phenomena that affect people in the workplace. However, it was important for me to connect with the data at a deeper level. The theme became 'Navigating Power and Tensions: Organisational Dynamics in Development' as this captured the tension better and the language used encapsulated the latent ideas that underpinned the emotional, contextual and experiential information gathered from interviews.

This last example is particularly useful, as when I reflect on that process, and deconstruct how different forces affected the theme's development, it strikes at the heart of my journey through this process. Power dynamics in the workplace, in my experience and in the literature, are both overt and covert. There will at times be workplace situations that we have to challenge, that go directly against policies, such as discrimination, inequality or injustice. When such situations present themselves, we must bring attention to them and aim to rectify them. However, many situations are not black and white, and there are examples that exist in the grey area or are not even visible to an untrained eye. By attuning myself to the postmodern literature, and immersing myself in the interview data, my ability to understand, interpret and reflect on the stories of individuals, and my ability to subsequently train myself to recognise challenges and injustices arising from hidden power interactions improves. On reflection, this was a revelation to me, and it continues to be so. As my ideas around

postmodernism, and its relevance to everyday life, ebb and flow the critical skills I have honed will continue to live with me. However, this could be both good and bad, as there are many examples of injustice and frustration in the world, whether in the workplace or wider society. It can feel both exhausting and empowering to want to challenge such things and commit energy to trying to make things better. I must realise that sometimes things are out of my control; this will be an important point for reflection both now and in the future.

Overall, this process required me to define each theme in terms of its essence i.e. what is the theme really about? I asked myself, 'What story is this theme telling? What is the broader narrative at play here?' In this phase, it was important that I recognised the stories that were coming from each individual. However, for this research to have greater meaning to me, and for meaningful consideration by others, it would need to lead to action that enhanced the lives of individuals. For this to be the case, I had to pay attention to the way the themes interacted, how they conflicted and to appreciate the disruptive and turbulent elements of them. The fractious, fragmented and forceful nature of these discoveries mirrors the nature of identity and power within postmodernism.

Phase 6: Writing Up

Writing up is the final phase, but according to Braun and Clarke (2022b), it's also an integral part of the entire analysis process. Writing helps the researcher refine their thoughts and articulate their insights.

My process:

This was the most exciting part of the analysis for me. Writing the results allowed me to reflect not only on the themes but also on my role as researcher. My enjoyment of this process was enhanced by having the time to sit, reflect, explore and interpret. Balancing a part-time doctorate with a full-time job has been a challenge, particularly around generating time for dedicated work on understanding myself, the data and the interaction of both. The last six months were crucial as I was able to generate greater time and focus for understanding myself and the data. I worked hard to hone my skills at transferring the many thoughts into a narrative flow that worked, one that did the stories I collected justice, both in terms of understanding them in their own right, but also co-constructing meaning that would lead to change.

I embedded my interdisciplinary knowledge, including psychology, sociology and anthropology, into my writing while also reflecting on my own positionality. This included thinking about what had brought me to this position, including the knowledge, skills and abilities I had developed, and the way I had been shaped and influenced by my experiences, the jobs I had done and the people I had met. The writing up phase helped me refine my reflective ability, connecting parts of me to the world around me in more effective ways and affording me opportunities to step back and consider who I am and how that has changed. It also allowed me to connect with my future-self more passionately than I had ever done before. This came through as a sense of renewed enthusiasm for recognising, challenging and changing things that are wrong with the way things work, both in society and in my job. I realise that postmodernism has been critiqued for its lack of ideas for changing the world (Kirby, 2006; Sim, 2011). It is seen by its critics as being focussed on burning down what exists without offering a compelling alternative, or any alternative really. However, for me I see postmodernism as an opportunity; it is a tool to challenge, deconstruct and critique everything around me while at the same time I can try and make it have meaning. How I take that forward and use it as a force for good is up to me. I have a chance to start that journey through my research.

There has been a lot to reflect on, and to understand reflexively, regarding my journey as a doctoral student. I have enjoyed weaving together the voices of participants with my own analytic insights, mixing their narratives with my reflections on power, identity, and meaning making. This phase felt like a culmination of all the thinking and reflection I had done throughout the research, and it was gratifying to see how the themes and insights took shape in written form. One of the reasons I chose to do a DBA, rather than a PhD, was the fact that a DBA involves connecting with a workplace, of being able to put forward recommendations and that there was a tangible chance to drive change. That desire to want to see change happen, change driven by effective research, has not changed across the course of the doctorate. What has changed is my ability to critique, discover, interpret and co-create knowledge, developing understanding and to align my passion with my behaviour. I see a route for evolution, both for the organisation I work within but also me as a person. I am excited to see where both of those journeys go.

Phase 7: Evolving Professional Development

This phase does not form part of the 6 step process that Braun and Clarke (2022b) have constructed for RTA. However, it is a natural evolution from that process for me as it is still

grounded in reflexive processes, and encourages reflexivity in others, but also aligns with my desire to help others to develop themselves. This cuts to the core purpose of the research to enable colleagues to flourish through professional development.

To achieve my goal of making a difference in the workplace, and an important element of the write up for a professional business doctorate, it is important that I take time to craft recommendations for the workplace, but ones that remain true to the RTA process and align with postmodern principles. Therefore, I am calling the section 'Evolving Professional Development' (p.142). I have used the term evolving purposefully as this links back to ideas in postmodernism around the fluid nature of identity, of change being persistent and that each one of us is on a development journey, one with no end destination. Rather, we evolve and change continually, and we shape ourselves to the contexts, the people and the places where we are at the time.

The suggestions made in that chapter will, it is hoped, evolve the way colleagues act, interact and understand themselves and others in the workplace. A typical workplace report would present senior management with a list of recommendations, usually phrased in a way that would suggest there is a list of things to do to or with staff that would help them perform better or behave more in line with organisational expectations. Instead, my principles of 'evolving professional development' will speak directly to individuals in the organisation, they will highlight the messages that are embedded in this research with a view to helping others connect to individual stories, appreciate different identities in the workplace, and to find a way forward, in professional development terms, that is meaningful to them and their own contexts. Leadership within the organisation will have an important part to play here, as leaders can both be a force for change, or a barrier to it (Lewin, 1952; Hofstede, 1986; Schein, 1993; Young, 2020). However, the connection I want to make with staff through this research is position agnostic – leaders, managers, those in power, all have individual contexts and pressures, and this research could be empowering for individuals, and enlightening, regardless of seniority.

My process:

When an organisation wants to encourage continuous improvement, particularly through tactical interventions, it can be described as Organisation Development (Green, 2020). When interventions are adopted as part of organisation development strategies, they usually align with the goals of the organisation with the hope of bringing out a particular result or results. There is usually a focus on the needs of the organisation rather than those of the

individual. This is the exact opposite of what I believe should be the case in the workplace and the reason why I wanted to take a bottom-up approach, with a postmodern slant, so that traditional thinking could be challenged. I have taken the opportunity to craft recommendations that align with understanding individual stories, that both challenge and generate awareness around power dynamics in the work place, that instil ideas around equity rather than equality, and that give agency to individuals to pursue professional development in a way that is meaningful for them, releasing themselves (to some extent) from the burden of expectations placed on them by organisational and societal needs.

A structured approach to organisation development, one that is recommended by the CIPD, is that outlined by Cheung-Judge and Holbeche (2011). The phases suggested include:

1. Contracting
2. Data Collection
3. Data Analysis
4. Feedback
5. Action Planning
6. Action Taking
7. Evaluation
8. Termination

Given my focus on postmodern critique, I find such an approach hard to look at. It is overly structured, and the language used lacks affinity and empathy for the individuals involved in such processes. It is important to me that my ideas on 'evolving professional development' resonate with individuals, that they highlight the power of context, storytelling and personal truths, and that they encourage individuals to act for themselves. The impact of this study comes from my ability to inspire others to focus on professional development, to see the value of connecting with others and to give them increased ability to understand their contexts, and the drivers therein (both overt and covert), so that they can approach their own personal development with renewed focus and understanding.

Ethical considerations

As my previous qualifications revolve around psychology, particularly work psychology, it is appropriate that I should refer to the guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS). Their guidelines on ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2021) suggest that there are four ethical principles that guide and shape any work, research or activity that takes place under its remit, these are (1) *Respect*, (2) *Competence*, (3) *Responsibility* and (4) *Integrity*. The importance of these concepts is backed up by other commentary on ethics. For instance, Diener and Crandall (1978) also identify four areas that are essential for

consideration when conducting ethical research, specifically, whether there is (1) harm to participants, (2) Informed consent, (3) Invasion of privacy and (4) deception involved. These four points map onto those offered by the BPS, however, the BPS Code of Ethics gives a boarder view of ethical considerations and boundaries within which to work.

The 4 pillars of ethics, offered by the BPS, sets the context for how ethics should be conducted within this research. The BPS consider *Respect* a universal ethical principle, regardless of geographical, cultural or professional distinctions. Their view is that all human beings are worthy of equal moral consideration. With this distinction it is easy to see how it could easily be applied regardless of context. When the principle of *Respect* is broken down, it applies to privacy, confidentiality, power, consent and it also marks out the importance of compassion. These areas are all important for consideration when conducting this research and will all form part of my ethics application within the University.

The pillar of *Competence* relates to the need for specialist knowledge, training, skill and experience. There is a clear directive from the BPS that members of that body should not provide professional services that are outside their abilities when those key areas are considered. When applied to research these points are just as important. The training of a doctoral candidate to effectively conduct research is vitally important. When an ethical application has been provided with a favourable opinion it is assumed that the person responsible for the research will have the necessary skills, knowledge and ability to perform that research in the correct manner. For instance, gaining informed consent, handling data correctly, conducting an interview effectively and analysing data with skill and without bias.

Responsibility, in the BPS framework, refers to the need to accept responsibility for what is within the researcher's power, control or management and that the duty towards others is of the highest priority. For instance, as I will be conducting interviews on my own with an interviewee, I have responsibility for ensuring that that person feels comfortable during the interview and that I am prepared for, and react to, any signs of uncomfortableness or stress over and above what would usually be expected. As the research lead, I must ensure that I have their best interests in focus above everything else. The fourth pillar, *Integrity*, refers to the need to be honest, truthful, accurate and consistent. When I apply this to myself, it is about being objective, avoiding conflicts (such as self-interest) and maintaining boundaries (personal and professional). The latter point is particularly important as there may be interviewees who I know through a work capacity, or a personal capacity, and having the right boundaries in place will be particularly important.

On reflection, when thinking about the four pillars identified in the Code of Ethics and Conduct (The British Psychological Society, 2021), I have already planned for each participant to receive a participant information sheet and a consent form (the combination of which will allow each participant to give their informed consent to take part in the study). Each person will understand exactly what is involved in the study, what it is trying to achieve and what the benefits are before they agree to take part. Participants will not receive payment for their involvement in this study so an understanding of the benefits of their involvement, to the University, and potentially to themselves, could be an important element in their decision to take part. It seems unlikely that participants talking about professional development will feel like their privacy is under threat, however, it is important that all interviews are handled sensitively, and this relates back to the pillars of *Responsibility* and *Integrity*. Participants may feel uncomfortable for a variety of reasons during the interview (for instance, they could have had experience of workplace bullying, been frustrated with a lack of development opportunities or could have experienced some other form of work-based distress) even if the risk is low. It is important, that in this situation, the participant is offered the chance to withdraw from the interview, or to at least, move on from a particular line of questioning (Kvale, 2007; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). The researcher will be equipped with the details of relevant support services should the occasion arise where a participant needs that form of intervention. It is worth noting that this study involves no form of deception that needs ethical consideration.

Aston University has its own set of ethics regulations and procedures (Aston University, 2020). All the information contained in this section was used as part of the submission for ethics approval within the College, including a participant information sheet, consent form and interview guide. As part of these regulations, it was important to consider whether the research generates any public controversy (there was low risk of this happening) and if the research involves any vulnerable groups as participants. Both of these considerations map on to the BPS pillar of *Responsibility* (The British Psychological Society, 2021). The only potentially vulnerable groups that could have been involved in this study are academics over 65 years of age, those that have physical disabilities or those that are pregnant (or some combination of the three). Even though these groups are classed as vulnerable, the risk to these individuals is low and it is possible to make any adjustments that participants might need.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted either in person or using digital platforms (Zoom or Teams). The choice was made by individuals on which type they preferred. For face-to-face interviews, a portable set up was used to record the interview including wireless lapel mics, a recording device (Zoom H2) and my phone was used for back-up recording. A quiet space was booked within the university, away from others, so that the interview remains undisturbed, and interviewee anonymity was preserved. In case the interviewee felt uncomfortable speaking on campus a different venue off campus was always offered (though no participant pursued that option). The audio recordings from the interviews were uploaded to the transcription software (otter.ai) and they were processed by the system. The recordings were checked for accuracy my myself and this helped ensure the right words and messages were on the transcripts, but it also helped to further the immersion process, an important part of the process in RTA mentioned above. Digital recordings had the video feed enabled so that rapport could be built with the individual and the non-verbal cues in communication could be appreciated. The audio was separated from the video feed on completion of the interview and the video element destroyed. The audio from interviews was stored, and destroyed, in line with the processes outlined to the participant (see Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet).

The interview transcripts were anonymised and the first stage of this was redaction of all overt information that could identify the individual. The second stage was redaction of all information that could be pieced together to generate information about the individual. You will see in the transcripts the term '[redacted]' used to highlight where this has been done. The interviewees were given a two-week period, from the date of the interview, within which they could ask to for their data to be withdrawn from the study. All recorded materials were stored on Box (the University's preferred supplier for digital online storage) as it was secure and had appropriate back up protocols in place. Access to the data collected was limited to the researcher, the supervisory team and the transcription service used.

Chapter Summary

This methodology chapter has outlined the philosophical, theoretical, and practical underpinnings of the research design, grounded in postmodernism and relativist ontology. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was chosen as the primary method for data analysis due to its alignment with the study's goals of exploring subjective experiences and power dynamics in professional development.

The data collection process used semi-structured interviews, allowing for rich, detailed narratives that reflect the diverse identities and experiences of academic staff. Reflexivity played a key role in the study, with the researcher critically reflecting on their positionality as both an insider and researcher. Ethical considerations were robustly addressed, ensuring participant safety, privacy, and respect. This chapter has demonstrated how the methodology is coherent with the study's aims and provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis and findings.

4. Analysis

Chapter Overview

This chapter, titled ‘Analysis’, departs from traditional results sections to align with social constructivist principles, focusing on my interpretative engagement with the data. Through RTA inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022b), five primary themes are evident through co-construction and interpretation: Adapting to Change, Building Connections, Empowered Growth, Equity and Quality, and Navigating Power and Tensions. Each theme offers insights into how professional development is experienced and influenced by various institutional, personal, and societal factors, underscoring the importance of context and reflexivity. The analysis draws attention to the complex, often competing demands faced by academics as they navigate professional roles in a metric-driven environment, revealing how power dynamics, personal agency, and institutional structures shape development. This chapter is an exploration of these themes, serving as a guide to understanding how external structures and personal experiences intersect within the professional development of academic staff.

Theme: Navigating Power and Tensions: Organisational Dynamics in Development

This theme links directly to one of my sub-research questions (SRQ1: How does the person’s understanding of external regulations/requirements shape an individual’s professional development, either directly or indirectly?), though there were some wider observations I had not considered as part of my literature review or my own experiences within HE.

There were a variety of different types of external influences mentioned, such as those from a governmental quality-checking perspective, such as REF, TEF and KEF. There was also the consideration of professional bodies, and the affect they can have on directing the activities of individuals, but this applies to certain career pathways and trajectories more than others. For instance, those in Law, Accountancy or even for myself, there is pressure from involvement in professional bodies to keep developing, to act in a certain way and to demonstrate development. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Advance HE performs

roles that oversee the success of students and guide excellent teaching respectively and there are school-specific accreditations and associations, particularly for the Business School, that also drive activity for academic staff. Although I had realised all these different entities existed, it is interesting to note how people feel pressured by the range of different influences, but that also some rate much higher than others in terms of their influence.

The most important external influence for those interviewed is REF, by far, as it formed a key discussion point among many of the interviews with comments such as '…*REF is the absolute top'* (DBA6, p.117) and that '… i*f you're thinking about building your CV, moving jobs, getting promoted… then the REF is really important*…' (DBA3, p.65). This makes sense from several perspectives, as the first version of REF (known as the Research Assessment Exercise) ran in 2014 but covered work across the period from 2008-2013. That means people have been actively monitored and assessed in this way for the last 16 years. It also makes sense when you consider the value given to research across the sector compared to teaching and engagement, and that '…*we need to pay attention to teaching, and teaching quality, but, but the reputation of a university is made in its research, I think, rather than its teaching*.' (DBA14, p.252). Indeed, my own experiences in HE has shown that research is perceived to be much more valuable for reputation than teaching. For instance, you can generate a global reputation through your research, but there are very few people who generate a global reputation through teaching. I have also witnessed the pressure exerted by REF on many colleagues within the University and the pressure put on academics to deliver publications, peer review of publications, impact case studies, writing environment statements, gathering reports and delivering research metrics. The pressure is enormous and engagement in the process is based on it being important for the university, therefore it becomes important for individuals. This is particularly true in terms of promotion and job security, but there is an underlying sense that the process itself is not valuable, that it is a waste of time and resources, and that it is in place for the wrong reasons. For instance, sense of feeling and thought was reinforced a number of times, with comments such as:

> *'…all of those league tabelling type things about, are about instilling market pressures, league tables, you know, the top, the bottom, we all want to be at the top, that's competitive. And it's an idea that that will force us all to be better and better in some ways, where in fact, what we know is that all we, we doubt the measures and metrics all the time… we'll jump through the hoops for the REF, but so and so over there won't be entered, even though they're an excellent researcher, because they*

> *don't meet that model… I've got people in my group who've been doing really, really good research, but the kind of outputs they produced weren't REF-able. And that's a problem for their career development.'*
>
> (DBA14, p.254)

And that '…*REF and TEF I think are basically poison or cancer, depending on what metaphor you want to go with*' (DBA10, P.186). However, there is the recognition that activities like REF '… *play a pivotal role, because the REF is the mechanism through which the government gives money to the university. So, it's a key driver of the interventions that a university puts in place.*' (DBA17, p.302). It seems that people recognise the flawed system within which we work but also recognise the need to take part in the system, particularly for research. However, that focus on research and the need to develop publications, grants, impact and engagement does not translate to an increased uptake of people using the vitae framework to develop their research skills and abilities. In fact, the vitae framework, and vitae generally, was referenced very little in interviews and is seen as a tool for doctoral students, or at a push, useful for early career academics. It seems strange to me that given the importance of research, both in perception against competing priorities, and the kudos it brings that people are not using purpose-built frameworks to enhance their development. In fact, many interviewees did not reference the framework, nor did they realise it existed even when directly questioned.

Although REF was highlighted for its importance, both TEF and KEF did not fare so well. When you consider that the Franz (2009) model of engaged scholarship references research, teaching and engagement as important components of a modern day academic role, you would expect the frameworks for assessing excellence to feature highly across all three areas. Even a more traditional view, where roles were focused on Teaching and Research, would lead one to think that both REF and TEF would feature as important. However, TEF, and even more so KEF, did not feature highly and when they did, it was very much a nod to their existence rather than them being important. They did not drive the activity of staff. To me, a primary purpose of a university is developing generations of students to be able to learn, develop and to prepare them for further study, career progress and to some extent enhance life-based skills. For that reason, I would have expected the achievable levels of fellowship available as part of Advance HE to feature highly, and for that to be an important factor for staff who are keen to better themselves and their teaching practices for the good of students. Surprisingly, TEF is not considered particularly important,

and furthermore, working towards Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow is seen as a necessary stepping stone for promotion, rather than being a pathway to improvement and success as an Educator. In fact, comments such as:

> *'…I could go on for ages about Advance HE and HEA. I'll try and keep it brief. So I'm Senior Fellow, I got, did it at my first institution, I got a badge. I don't have it with me, but I could show you, it's got some shiny bits on it. I would say, it's probably the most I got from that. Apart from occasionally, I remember mentioning I've got Senior Fellow at a job interview and they basically said 'well done' but they did not care.'*
>
> (DBA10, p.192)

> *'… the HEA is sort of, at least in my area, is viewed as a bit of a joke. Just, just because all you had to do really to get accreditation was write up a couple of paragraphs and send in, if you just pay 100 quid, they'll just give it to you. So it's that, they don't even cross my mind really, it's something that you have to slap on your CV, and then I never thought about it again.'*
>
> (DBA2, p.41)

Another example would be when someone is describing the UK Professional Skills Framework, the core of what underpins fellowship levels in Advance HE, they commented that on its use, '…*to be honest, if I'm honest, no, I haven't thought about it past couple of years now*.' (DBA16, p.284). This type of commentary, and the underlying sense of the comments made across the interview set, suggest that it is not at the core of the need to develop and improve the experience of students, rather, it is a stepping stone to be reached to progress up the academic rank ladder. This is an example of an issue I have seen at various points in HE, that to raise the quality levels of those at the bottom, we place constructed hurdles in place that act as barriers to progression to enforce activity. This means that people engage with the process enough to attain the accolade and disengage just as quickly. This type of response can be linked back theories to theories regarding extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2018, 2020) and of culture and culture change (Lewin and Lewin, 1948; Lewin, 1952; Schein, 1993, 2004). What should be happening is that a culture and climate are developed that maximise the ability of staff to deliver effective student experiences. An environment that is based around providing support to each other through feedback, that encourages idea generation and communities of practice, and that encourage the use of Advance HE as a framework for development, one that lives with each person across the course of their career. Instead, what we have is

staff doing what is necessary to jump through a hoop to get promoted rather than finding a way to embed continuous improvement activities. There were some positives raised, such as the process encouraged reflection, but an argument to that would be that individuals should be reflecting on their practice as an improvement mechanism as a matter of course, not waiting until they have to do it for promotion processes. Overall, it is summed up effectively by DBA19:

> *'…and, this, this, this festival of different fellowships and super fellowships, or whatever they're called, which is increasingly being asked for, with no reference at all back to the student experience, that I can see, and then a unanimous view amongst people that have done them, that did it as a box to tick because I want to get my promotion, is really, is really unhelpful and too much of it is sort of process focused.'*
>
> (DBA19, p.332).

A related area that cuts across the College affects those staff where membership of a professional body, one outside of HE, plays an important part in their career trajectory. For instance, in my own practice as an educator I have to manage the pressures exerted by the university, external pressures similar to those mentioned above, but also pressures that come from my professional bodies the CIPD and the BPS. I have made the conscious decision to engage more with the CIPD over recent years, where I have become a Committee Member of the Birmingham Branch as the Student Engagement Lead. For me, meeting the expectations laid out by the CIPD is important, as it is one of the identities I have developed over time and it links me to the human resources community, and that link positively informs and enhances my teaching practice. Like many professional bodies, if not all, ideas around continuous professional development remains important and form the backbone of demonstrating competence in a profession. Many other colleagues will have external demands placed on them by professional bodies due to the nature of the work that they do, particularly if they come from a practitioner background. This link with professional bodies can be traced to many of the courses we teach, as we use the accreditation of professional bodies to further validate our courses and encourage greater student uptake. These links mean that there is more pressure on us as individuals to leverage membership of our professional bodies for the good of our university identity, by embedding ourselves in the community and meeting the regulatory requirements that come alongside our involvement with those bodies, as '… *we have to demonstrate we give certain skills to our, to our students, … in some of the sciences, for example, or accountancy, or whatever way, you know, professional body bits*.' (DBA19, p.340)

It seems then, given the amount of different external frameworks and forces that affect and purport to enhance the functioning of the University, that these would be an important element of successfully developing the organisation. However, rather than enhancing performance, they tend to a limiting factor. Through my analysis of the interviews, these types of influences were a constraining factor, they stifled innovation, dampened creativity and forced adherence to traditional views of success. From a postmodern perspective, it seems that such mechanisms restrict the University's ability to reach its full and natural potential. By putting so much weight on these external forces, and making them the focus of activity, the boundaries that people work within are limiting the potential of employees to excel. There is such a wide array of measurements and metrics being passed to individuals through the organisation, often without filtering nor appreciating individual capabilities, that it is a disservice to those involved. This approach does not enable the University to make use of the full talent potential available to it.

From the interviews, my experiences within HE and feedback from the sector generally, the REF has been one of the most powerful external drivers of activity. The underlying forces that surround the REF are power, control and authoritarianism (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Foucault and Gordon, 1980). This framework has its roots firmly embedded in modernism and traditional western ways of thinking. It holds power and seeks to control knowledge production, as it prioritises certain types of knowledge, particularly those that align with established, dominant disciplines and epistemologies. In this case, it positions the government and select academic elites as arbiters of 'quality'. It is a controlling mechanism that allows decisions and control to be made over what constitutes valuable knowledge. Additionally, it is a self-rewarding mechanism where those that adhere to the rules of the game the best, are rewarded the most. The question I ask myself, and one that aligns with a postmodern viewpoint, is why do we need to define what good knowledge is? By defining good knowledge, we marginalise other forms of knowledge that are outside the norm thus reinforcing hierarchical structures within academia. Does this seem inclusive? Are we valuing opinions, generating new ideas and encouraging innovation through an approach that is focused on discouraging variety of voice, one that is forcefully aligning research priorities with institutional and governmental objectives? To me, the answer is no on both counts. We are not being inclusive, and we are not encouraging research, and researchers, to search for variety, to seek innovation and to strive for creativity and exploration.

Another issue that exists within this type of authoritarian approach, through REF and other systems, is around bias. Alluded to in the above paragraph, and I have seen this first hand when working within research administration, is the lack of inclusivity in such approaches. This is particularly evident when addressing the potential for gender bias inherent in traditional research support, funding and attainment mechanisms. A common postmodern critique would argue that seemingly objective structures can reinforce existing biases. Using REF as an example, it does not explicitly exclude women, or indeed other underrepresented groups, however, it could be argued that the focus on metrics and processes within the framework can inadvertently reinforce gender disparities. The emphasis on publication output and the impact of research aligns with career trajectories, opportunities and networks that historically favour men. As far back as 1990, Joan Acker (1990) wrote about gendered organisations and the production and reproduction of gendered structures. For her, gender is embedded in organisational roles and practices, and these can shape behaviours, expectations and career outcomes. The privilege of men, and the patriarchal systems that support them, continues to be examined (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012) for good reason. In my own experience, I have had female colleagues question me directly on why the University does not have a variety of mechanisms in place to support the career development of women. Historically, fair treatment has meant everyone having access to the same level of support and that allows the University, and the people controlling funding, opportunities and objectives, to present an argument that everyone has the same chance to succeed. However, it goes back to a common issue raised across organisations that everyone's starting point is different (Bensimon, 2005; Espinoza, 2007), and that some individuals need more support than others to achieve the standards specified, and others appreciate different types of support, not just a one size fits all approach to assistance. Females have traditionally had a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities, and it is easy to imagine that a female academic would find it much harder to dedicate time towards generating publications, building networks, and developing impact – all things which the REF would reward directly or indirectly. If you add to this the idea that certain fields are more populated by female researchers than male, such as humanities or social science, the likelihood that females could be consistently undervalued and under supported is exacerbated. This would further reinforce existing gender and disciplinary bias.

At its root, many of the ways that external forces affect academics at an individual level, is based around Western modernist notions (Habermas, 1987; Sim, 2011; Pagden, 2013). That is, research quality is valued through its objectivity, productivity and impact. Ideas which are defined by capitalist and instrumentalist criteria. Having such metrics can be traced back to The Enlightenment, where the ideals were seen as progress, measurable outcomes and universal truths. This limits the ability of individuals to explore ways of knowing in the way that they want to – advancement is only valued if it is fits into the preconceived ideas of those that are making decisions and controlling knowledge production. By emphasising measurable outcomes, such as publications, citations, impact, and funding, we are excluding those that come from non-Western and non-traditional backgrounds where there is value placed on approaches that value community-based, qualitative, and relational forms of research. Such methods suffer, wrongly so, because they do not fit the grand narrative that objectivity and positivism rule above all, and linear, outcome focused methods of assessment are enforced. If we are going to truly release the potential of all staff, then we need to be mindful of the bias and oppression that systems like REF can cause, and that we at least try to, at a local level release that burden to some extent.

Theme: Empowered Growth: Personal Agency and Professional Identity

Across the different interviews I conducted the ideas of personal agency and professional identity resonated strongly. Bandura suggested (2006) that people are more than the products of their environment, rather they are active agents in their own life. There are some interesting ideas that he proposes, particularly around emphasising individual empowerment, contextual influences and the rejection of deterministic structures. These types of theories can be linked back to postmodern ideals that focus on self-directedness, fluid identity and situational flexibility. Though it should be noted that Bandura's work was empirically based, which does conflict with postmodern views, and he also presented a conflicting view of identity that was much less fragmented that the ideas presented through postmodernism. However, the ideas about personal empowerment, the effect of context and the rejection of deterministic structures are an important connective thread. It would be useful to consider the work of Giddens (1986) here as he talked about how there is a recursive relationship between agency and structure, and how individuals both navigate and shape their environments. The underlying ideas from the interviews hinted at this idea that there was a careful balance to be found between the organisational structures and

mechanisms that each of us have to work within, but also having a good sense of self, of feeling empowered and taking ownership of our individual developmental journeys. For instance, on that latter point, it was suggested that '…*professional development is very much about my responsibility, partly because it's actually about deciding in what ways I want to develop and how I'm going to do that*' (DBA10, p.180). While not everyone was as clear about their motivations, and of feeling empowered, there was an underlying sense that ownership of development was important.

More recently, further exploration of reflexivity, particularly how individuals navigate social contexts through reflexive processes (Archer, 2007), has been particularly useful. We have already discussed the importance of reflexive practice within professional development (see Literature Review), and its use in approaches to thematic analysis (see Methodology), but it is worth re-emphasising that Archer understands individuals are active agents in their own reality, who engage in reflexive processes. These processes allow them to interpret and respond to their environment – it is driven by internal conversation that allows individuals to assess their circumstances, make decisions and set their own goals and priorities. However, we need to be careful about the way we describe reflexivity, and our expectations around engaging with it, as it has been shown how people experience internal conversations, or inner speech can vary considerably (Hurlburt and Heavey, 2001; Alderson-Day and Fernyhough, 2015; de Rooij, 2022). This is an important point, particularly for enhancing the practice of others, as we need to get the terminology correct if we are to encourage individuals to engage in and develop such phenomena in the right ways. For me, this is an incredibly important component of the way I experience, reflect on and be reflexive about my context, my relationships, my career and my identities. I have, over time, become more attuned to listening to my inner voice and has become an important aspect of how I deal with stressful situations and challenge my automatic thought processes. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that ideas on identity and personal agency resonated so strongly with me, is this connection to my own inner voice and how important it has been for my own journey in understanding my varying identities and my development journey.

One of the key points that Archer (2007) makes is about the situational nature of agency. That the ability for an individual to act is influenced by their social context, past experiences and available resources. It would be easy to imagine a situation where an academic member of staff engages in reflexive thinking regarding their role, giving consideration to factors such

as institutional priorities, regulatory bodies or professional associations (See Theme: Navigating Power and Tensions: Organisational Dynamics in Development). It is through this type of reflexive process that individuals evaluate the alignment of their personal values and career goals with the professional environment. For me, this has been important in my career, where I have had to consider how well the environment is suited to meeting my needs as well as me being able to meet their needs. In fact, one of the things I am most passionate when talking to students about their future careers is that they should be focused on finding the right environment that can nurture and develop them, allowing them to reach their full potential, and to remind them that it is not just about getting a job that pays a salary. Another thing I remind students about is that the ever-changing nature of work environments and that is something that Archer also writes about. The idea of treating the work environment as more fluid, and an individual's place in that as ever changing and context dependent, resonate strongly with postmodern views on agency. It seems important for each of us to understand an individual's need to constantly negotiate paths within the structures that they are based, and we should all be trying to generate a workforce that places self-awareness and adaptability high up the list of necessary skills to be successful.

The knowledge I was generating and co-constructing with my participants during the interviews proved particularly interesting as this was one of the few times staff had space and time to consider their own development needs and to put reflection and reflexivity into practice. A realisation that underpinned conversations was that space to talk was important, both for them as individuals but also a recognition that it was important for others too. There was a sense that engaging in this process of talking was cathartic, empowering and desperately needed. For me, space and time for inner speech (as mentioned above) is vitally important but also the opportunity to talk to colleagues about their stresses, strains and difficulties, but also about the successes, joys and values that their context and situation brings them. That sharing of information is important for me, but also it seemed important for them, and it made the interview process useful from a research perspective but also as a developmental step for all the parties involved. It was also evident that multiple identities were being considered through the discussion, whether those ideas had already been formed, or whether recognition was born out of the conversation. This is not the first time that I have recognised the variety of identities that individual colleagues hold across my interactions with both professional services and academic staff. It seems identities could be considered in terms of areas like personal, professional, and cultural. By using the professional aspect as an example, such as the role of a T&R member of staff, then it would

be easy to define identities as ‘The Researcher’, ‘The Teacher’, ‘The Engager’ and ‘The Administrator’. During the interviews there were direct comments that related to identity, such as ‘‘... *I really see it in terms of my disciplinary and professional identity, which is I would say practitioner first and academic second*...’ (DBA10, p.180). However, there were other comments where the underlying message related back to issues around identity, for instance, ‘… *there are colleagues who believe that teaching gets in the way of their research*…’ (DBA11, p.199) and ‘… *the thing with teaching is that there’s this immediate kind of risk… because we know that there’ll be internal consequences if you’ve got bad scores or students complained about you*…’ (DBA12, p.220). Whether explicitly, or implicitly, there was an underlying sense that identity played a key part in influencing professional development. The priorities of each individual will vary but it all links back to how individuals view themselves and how others view them.

The NIDA framework (Gee, 2000) allows for an exploration of identity and suggests that there are four ways to view identities in education, and while it would typically be applied to students, it also works for academic staff.

> **N-Identities** (Nature perspective): based on perceived inherent traits, often attributed to nature e.g. genes or neurological characteristics. Can be considered fixed here and that they gain meaning as identities only when recognised by individuals or institutions.
>
> **I-Identities** (Institutional perspective): stem from positions within institutions e.g. ‘Teacher’, ‘professor’ or ‘student’. These positions are defined by authorities within the institution, who determine the associated rights and responsibilities.
>
> **D-Identities** (Discursive perspective): arise from how individuals are recognised in discourse and dialogue with others e.g. being seen as ‘charismatic’ or ‘friendly’ are D-Identities. These identities rely on the interpretations and interactions of ‘rational individuals’.
>
> **A-Identities** (Affinity perspective): A-Identities emerge from shared experiences and practices within affinity groups e.g. being a ‘Star Trek fan’ or part of a ‘community of learners’. Allegiance to shared practices forms the basis of these identities.

Understanding identity in this way could allow for individual's to be more self-reflective and reflexive, but also allow for them to understand their interaction with others, or with institutions, more effectively. For instance, familiarity with N-Identities might allow a person to understand personality predispositions. That could be grasping the idea that someone might enter academia because of natural curiosity and the need to seek intellectual stimulation. This would then be recognised by others, or by an institution, which would then give meaning to that identity. Alternatively, I-Identities would be generated by the position the person held and could relate to classic identities of holding a role that is teaching focussed, research focussed or, in the case of this study, a role that covers both teaching and research. If one were to think about power structures, from a postmodern perspective, then there would be an institutional influence on how academics perceive their roles and how they enact them. This could be a particularly powerful link for those who would be classed as D-Identities as those identities are shaped by how they are perceived and recognised within their academic communities, whether for good (e.g. 'top performer', 'highly engaged') and for bad (e.g. 'waste of space', 'disinterested'). This type of identity is dependent on interactions with other academics and how they recognise the person within the institution or their field of enquiry. The last group, A-Identities, form around shared interests, such as research topics, methodological approaches, teaching styles, or the use of technology. Groups like this provide a sense of belonging, support and intellectual stimulation. By understanding our own sense of self, and how our different identities grow, shrink and mutate by the influence of institutions and others, a person would be able to better navigate the world they are in and ride the waves more confidently and with more clarity.

During the collection of data, and alongside my own reflections, it has become clearer that the fragmented nature of identity, and its multiplicity, means that the development paths of individuals are often non-linear and that they can differ wildly from one person to another. This is important because there should be a focus on catering for a diverse range of developmental needs. In fact, empowering and encouraging individuals to follow their own developmental pathway, to inspire an exploration of their needs, and to grasp what is important for them is vital. We need to empower individual development and encourage agency for pursuing person specific growth rather than relying on preformatted and generic development pathways presented, and their importance decided, by others. There are many routes to development and growth, and varying ways to learn, and these should be

recognised and encouraged in the workplace. One size does not fit all and until staff members start to challenge the university's ability to provide development based on individual needs then the usual systems and processes will remain in place. There is a realisation underlying the discourse captured in the interviews that Individuals need to take personal responsibility for their own development needs, to understand what develop opportunities exist currently and to be enthusiastic and vocal about new development ideas. This starts with understanding personal agency, professional identity and generating personal development narratives rather than accepting the narratives that are presented in the workplace based on efficiency, institutional goals and limited understanding of individuals.

Two of the research sub questions link directly to this area of analysis, namely:

> **SRQ2**: What tensions exist between the delivery of teaching and research?
>
> **SRQ4**: How does the experience level of academic staff influence professional development?

For me, there is tension between delivery of teaching and research. We can see above how individuals are trying to balance an oppressive range of pressures, both internal and external, that relate to the formation of identity, institutional needs and the level of confidence and empowerment an individual feels within their role. In a T&R focused role, it is not surprising that teaching and research can be considered the two most important areas for an academic to deliver. If all the other influences were put to one side, and the roles were broken down, there is tension between the wide range of skills that an individual is being asked to utilise in this type of role. For teaching, you might consider that individuals need communication and presentation skills, that they need interpersonal skills and an ability to relate to others, that their pedagogical knowledge is up to date and that they are well informed regarding curriculum design, and that they need to be adaptable and flexible in the classroom (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Race, 2020). Whereas for research you can imagine that analytical and critical thinking would be valued, that data analysis and methodological skills would be prized, and that the ability to write in a certain style and publish in certain journals or outlets would be of key importance. The ability to manage time, manage projects and coordinate with others may overlap, but the number of differences is much greater than the

similarities. Even if one was to focus just on research, the range of skills and abilities that you must develop, plus the additional delivery pressure, covers a vast range. Securing publications, achieving funding, generating impact, developing public engagement and learning the administrative systems that these processes revolve around is, on its own, an extensive piece of work requiring time and effort.

At its core, even though it is the most highly valued academic contract type available, it is flawed from the start. Those that identify as an educator may value the interaction with, and the success of students, much higher than research. If they prioritise development in these areas, it will take away time to develop in the research area and this will have a knock-on effect for meeting personal or institutional objectives. Developing engaging lectures, exploring new ways to teach, and providing mentorship to others are all valuable and all take time. If colleagues or the institution identify a person as being more interested in the teaching side of their role, they may be intentionally, or unintentionally, pigeonholed and may receive fewer research opportunities or less support. Students may identify this individual as being more accessible or invested in their success and the learning environment, and therefore they ask for more help or more attention. Those who identify more with the research side may value generating new knowledge over the day-to-day activities involved in teaching, they may prefer to focus on their own technical and analytical skills rather than want to develop the skills of students, and even sometimes viewing teaching as a secondary responsibility (as mentioned in the quote above: DBA11, p.199). When I worked at another institution, you could sense that most academics were there because they loved research, and that teaching was a necessary task to enable the research. This comes across in the culture and climate and is driven by individuals and those around them. Identification as being more research focused can also increase expectations, such as more publications, better impact, wide ranging engagement and higher levels of funding. This could result in less teaching, reinforcing their focus on research and generating more distance from the teaching community, as well lumbering colleagues who are more teaching orientated with more teaching. The decision of where to put your energy for development purposes is difficult. Time is limited and the pressures are high.

The tension then between teaching and research identities can cause internal conflict, and it can be the case that rather than celebrating success in one area, that the focus is put on the area where the individual has not done so well. If you choose research, but your teaching

scores fall, and students are unhappy, that could lead to trouble. If your teaching scores are excellent, but your publication success is poor, or you have not brought in funding, that will be criticised, and your performance will be challenged. From my experience, and from the narratives collected, there tends to be a greater focus on research excellence being a more attractive driver for the institution, and this trickles down to individuals. This is particularly acute in research-led institutions, but even for a dual-intensive University like Aston, it is the research that drives kudos and reputation. How do those that prefer teaching, where it aligns with their values and their understanding of the purpose of universities, feel about that focus? It could cause cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962; Cooper, 2007; Holley, 2021), the feeling of mental strain when the values or self-concept of an individual is contradictory to the behaviours they are asked to engage in. Individuals will often need to resolve that conflict, at least to some extent, to reduce the dissonance. In the worst-case scenarios, that could lead to disengagement, quiet quitting and potentially resignation. There are ways that this dissonance could be reduced, such as reframing the roles, or boundary setting, but this did not come across during the interviews and I have certainly not seen that happen in my experiences. Being able to encourage others to apply a postmodern perspective could help, as fragmented or hybrid identities are an important element of theorising in this area. It could help with the reframing process and individuals could better react to the fluidity needed to cope with a T&R based role. So rather than eradicating the dissonance, a person could learn to understand it, embrace it and use it as a motivating force for development.

Theme: Building Connections: Relational Networks and Social Support

During my time reflecting on the interviews, and considering my own experiences in the workplace, it seems that the formation of relationships and the benefit of interactions in the workplace are particularly important. For instance, the collegiality demonstrated and experienced within the work environment, and the support, advice and mentoring offered, have a profound effect on that way that people experience and make use of professional development. This is not a surprise as there is plenty of literature that relates to social networks and support systems in the workplace, for instance, Social Network Theory (Wasserman and Faust, 1995), ideas around social capital (Burt, 2007), and that weak ties in an expanded network can prove particularly useful (Granovetter, 1973; Rajkumar *et al.*, 2022). These theories are particularly important, as they outline the importance of network structure, how the quality of network ties shape behaviour and information flow, and that where you are positioned in a network affects the resources, support and development opportunities that can be accessed. Burt (2007), for instance, suggests the ideal of structural

holes i.e. gaps within networks. He suggests that understanding where connections are lacking can be leveraged to enable further career advancement and ability to gain knowledge previously inaccessible. In this case, an individual can act as a ‘broker’, or a ‘bridge’, where it is possible to connect otherwise unconnected groups.

In my own experiences, I have benefited from the connections I have made across an institution bringing together different departments or connecting individuals who share a common purpose but may not otherwise have met. Burt suggests that individuals who act in these roles to bring people and groups together gain additional information access, control and influence, and I have reaped those benefits personally. I have been particularly active in developing networks when I was self-employed, as my success relied heavily on making and utilising new connections, and I have previously performed business development roles, where again that skill set was both heavily developed and deployed. I have also been trained on networking skills directly, and still employ and talk about the training I received on a regular basis. That would make me more likely to pick up on the importance of networks and relationship as a theme, as I have noticed the benefits and importance of networks throughout my career. I would consciously, or even unconsciously, recognise when people talk about their experiences or reflections regarding networks and relationship building and would assign additional importance to their thinking in my interpretations. That does not mean that is the wrong thing to do, but it is important to recognise my personal subjectivity when generating and co-constructing my thoughts and interpretations. It is clear to me that academia revolves around connections, particularly in research, but I would question whether everyone in academia realises this. More importantly, I would challenge whether colleagues have consciously developed the skills to be able to reap the benefits from the relationships and networks that exist or could be developed around them.

The ideas behind Social Network Theory (Wasserman and Faust, 1995; Carrington, Scott and Wasserman, 2005) are particularly interesting when they are linked to professional development. The central actors in networks, those with numerous connections, tend to have better access to critical information and resources, this could include a particular expertise, specialist knowledge or skills, and potentially shared resources (such as PowerPoint presentations, assessment ideas or tips and tricks for accessing research funding). This type of enhanced access can easily lead to opportunities for building skills, career advancement and the exchange of knowledge. Given the benefits that these networks can bring, it would seem important that ideas on professional development,

particularly for it to run effectively, should include the use and development of such social networks. For instance, I have a background in photography and digital design and those colleagues that know about the skills I have developed, and have me within their network, are able to come to me for help, advice and support. In fact, I have been asked by colleagues to run sessions on topics such as developing effective PowerPoint slides or enhancing communication through images. For me, it is easy to recognise how these types of links have benefitted those around me, or when I have benefitted knowing the right person to talk to when I need additional help with particular skills, expertise or advice. One of the most important things I have learnt across my career is that it is often about who you know, rather than what you know, and this can be applied to job openings, training courses, successful projects and many other areas. It would seem impossible to learn all the skills you need to be excellent at everything, but it doesn't seem as impossible to tap into those skills through the networks that each of us can generate and maintain. So rather than trying to learn every new skill that each of us are missing, should we first concentrate on developing our relationship building and network creation skills as the foundational element that we build on. It would give power and agency to individuals to make choices on whether to developing a new connection with a skill or to develop the skill themselves. An important point, made by DBA12, was that '…*you do have to sort of keep your ears and eyes open, find out what people are doing*' (p.215) and that sense of curiosity and interest in what others are doing can be an important component of developing successful networks.

From a postmodern perspective, the ideas around networks work particularly well, as it favours the decentralisation and distribution of power. Social Network Theory (Wasserman and Faust, 1995; Carrington, Scott and Wasserman, 2005) demonstrates that influence and power are not always held by those in formal authoritative positions, but by those who are well-connected or occupy strategic positions within networks. This means that to be truly effective, and utilise opportunities for professional development, an individual needs to understand, develop and utilise networks to maximise their potential. Much like agency and identity, we can consider networks as fluid, particularly when it comes to issues of power and the ability to drive change and generate innovation, as these flow and mutate depending on your position in the network. For instance, if a particularly strong connection leaves your network, through a change in job or organisation, that can leave a large gap that would need to be filled. Likewise, adding new people to a network can cause ripple effects, and that can either work in your favour or against it. So, understanding networks, maintaining connections and developing new relationships becomes an important part of professional development.

Perhaps another identity that should be developed, amongst the many a T&R member of staff will hold, should be that of ‘Networker’, ‘Relationship Broker’ or ‘Connector’. One of the things I have always strived to do, probably from my time in business development roles, is to connect others whenever the opportunity arises. I do it as I believe people, and organisations, thrive on interconnectivity, but this is not a purely altruistic act, I also realise that it is beneficial for me on a personal level. Those two benefits do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The benefits referred to above have helped me to extend my ideas around the co-construction of knowledge through using multiple perspectives, and this too links back to ideas inherent in postmodern thinking. Social Network Theory and postmodernism both place value in diverse connections. In fact, the connections I hold within my professional and social circles are broader than they are deeper. My relationships, whether personal or professional, have ebbed and flowed over time for a variety of reasons, not least because of different contexts. However, one constant element has always been my enthusiasm and capacity to regularly introduce new people into those groups and to make connections between the individuals involved. I have been at Aston University for over 10 years and over that time I have built a considerable network across academic and professional services areas, and this has brought many benefits. For instance, it has helped me to appreciate and adopt new ways of thinking, it has encouraged me to interpret situations from different perspectives, it has allowed me to become a better problem solver, and it has increased my capacity to bring innovation and creativity to the workplace. Having expanded my network across various channels within the university I have a wide-ranging knowledge of what is happening across the university, where issues have been identified, and what could help to resolve those issues. The people I know, and the knowledge I have gained, has allowed me to face work-based challenges with more confidence as I often know who to talk to for help and it allows me to explore non-linear pathways to development, like those discussed earlier. Through my connections I can see, hear and investigate development opportunities as they arise across as I have a much broader network than many of my colleagues.

Ideas on the methods and models for analysing social networks has moved on over time and more the ability to offer practical insights and complex analytical frameworks has increased (Carrington, Scott and Wasserman, 2005). For instance, it is possible to identify patterns of interaction (through block models and exponential random graph models), and

these can be used to understand how social structures emerge and can be maintained. For professional development, this can be particularly useful, as it would be possible to map out knowledge flow, identify collaboration clusters and find out the different influences of network positions. However, taking this type of position does not really fit with postmodern views, where the value is placed on subjective and fragmented co-construction as opposed to structural and metric based approaches. While people could get value from a more strategic approach, although I value the connections and networks I have established, they have been more organic in nature, and I see no need to change that approach now. That ability to be authentic, and to bond over common ground, would be compromised by making the connection mechanisms more strategic.

One of the ways that connections can happen more organically and authentically is through communities of practice (CoP). CoP are groups of individuals who share a common concern, problem set or topic passion and they help deepen the knowledge and expertise of individuals through ongoing interaction with other similar people (Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022). There are three core elements when we explore CoP (1) **Domain**: the area of knowledge or practice around which the community is formed, (2) **Community**: the social relationships that develop among members, and (3) **Practice**: the shared repertoire of tools, techniques, stories and resources developed over time. The idea of CoP is that these three elements generate a learning environment for its constituents, based around shared experiences, common interests, and social interaction. CoP are one possible manifestation of underlying elements generated through the interviews, such as trust, respect, belonging and growth (as a community and as an individual). All these elements can be linked back to various theories within this thesis, but particularly those that provide a culture and climate that value growth, relationships and psychological safety. These areas are important within any organisation, and should be explored further, particularly how my experiences and reactions to these areas will have influenced the co-construction and interpretation of my analysis of interview responses.

A sense of connection and the importance of relationship building were elements of the interviews that resonated strongly. However, the importance of such things was also connected to feelings of frustration and disappointment. The ability to make internal connections, to build communities of practice, and to initiate new friendships proved harder than anticipated, and sometimes not possible at all. For instance, comments such as '*I did*

not feel that… the culture was there to foster the sort of, the motivation to work together to learn' (DBA13, p.231), '*I do feel that I don't have that mentorship, or someone that I can turn to for advice, or a sounding board…*' (DBA14, p.256) and *'…why do we even have people that do not have meaningful conversations with their colleagues and their staff?... why do we let people get away with it?*' (DBA18, p.318). These types of comments, and the underlying messages with them, mirror my own experiences, feelings and frustrations. When I reflect on my 10 years at Aston, when I first joined there was an excitement that I felt from the collegiality of staff, the community that had been built and the shared commitment towards making a difference for students and society. There was a warmth and genuineness about the way I was welcomed and the way in which I was able to build new connections. I didn't need to be told it was a great place to work, I could feel it for myself. Over time, that feeling has dwindled and my own frustrations have increased, and while conducting the interviews it became more apparent to me that the culture and climate had lost some of its magic. Earlier, the fractured nature of personal identities was considered, though this could easily be extended to understanding the university, as our relationship to the university, and our understanding of it, will also ebb and flow. Staff will interact with university and view it in different ways, and how they do this will change and mutate. As individuals, each of us can be reflective on the affect we have on others and how we direct our lives. It is up to each of us to make decisions that will positively impact others, and it is also up to us to put ourselves in situations and context where we can be the recipient of positive impact.

From a postmodern perspective the ideas inherent in CoP (Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022) fit well as, at its core, it is about decentralising learning and knowledge creation, rather than relying on formal instruction, particularly when that instruction is often initiated by those in positions of power. It is a move away from the notion of traditional hierarchical knowledge structures through co-creation of knowledge. Postmodern theorising places the focus on individuals and their context and this approach recognises and supports subjective and contextual knowledge generation and sharing. It also allows for identities to be more fluid, and for them to evolve, when compared to more traditional learning interactions. For instance, when you go on a formal course, you enter the course as the 'learner' and a person is usually the 'teacher' or 'educator', and these are mostly fixed. In a community of practice, it is possible to take on multiple roles, whether as a 'learner', a 'mentor', or a 'facilitator', and these can change quickly depending on the context and the flow of discussion and interest. This ties back to the discussion of identities earlier, and the ability of the individual to take on and navigate various professional and personal identities

within a community. It is likely that such communities will be informal and self-organising as they are based on the needs and interests of its members. In fact, trying to force people into a CoP would, in my experience, be counterproductive. For me, the value of such communities comes from excitement and interest in particular topics, and being personally motivated to share, learn and connect. I don't believe that communities are built on telling people 'you are in x community, get on with it', rather communities are built from the bottom up through shared interests and ideas, they are self-perpetuating entities that exist because the value of them is recognised by individuals. It is different when an organisation generates a CoP because they can see value in for the organisation, and you could question whether the artificial construction means that it can never really be a CoP. Previously, I set up a 'Lunch and Learn' group, working from the ground up, to give space and time to colleagues for sharing insights, to potentially build a community through common interests, and to help people learn in a non-traditional way. While it was more work for me and a colleague, it was important to both of us that we were able to foster more engagement and connection between staff and that we shared knowledge and skills, but also shared and generated passion and enthusiasm for learning. Having a focus on individual agency and autonomy for such communities, and for learning, echoes postmodern views, and offers choice on how people wish to engage in professional development opportunities.

Another way in which top-down views on learning are emphasised comes from the interactions of staff with those responsible for managing them. For me, managers can affect the development of individuals in a range of ways, and this includes (1) giving individuals the time and space to have meaningful developmental conversations, (2) focusing attention on developing their own ability to manage staff members (3) understanding what development can look and feel like for a diverse work group and (4) enabling individuals to make decisions, take agency and full realise their potential, utilise their strengths and give them freedom to explore what good looks like for them. However, these points are based on postmodern ideals that suggest that we move away from hierarchies and metrics, rather than the traditional views that usually drive performance in organisations, and that we put more focus on individuals, understand their context and that they concentrate on their personal developmental journey. It is unlikely that any organisation could completely decouple the development of staff from traditionally western top-down views on management, performance and metrics. It would, though, be interesting to think about how we shift the needle more towards celebrating individual needs, facilitating non-linear

development pathways and encouraging reflective, reflexive and contextual thinking for individuals.

If we are to focus on individuals, then understanding the motivation of individuals, becomes more important. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2018, 2020) suggests that there are three basic psychological needs for an individual, and that fulfilling these needs can help sustain motivation, promote well-being and generate personal growth. The three needs are:

Autonomy: this includes ideas on the importance of independence and being self-directed, it also stresses the need for someone's actions to be self-endorsed and being aligned with personal values and interests. This links back to theories on cognitive dissonance i.e. the psychological discomfort generated when there is conflict between a person's beliefs and values when compared to their behaviour (Festinger, 1962; Cooper, 2007). For Deci and Ryan, individuals are motivated when they perceive that they have a meaningful choice, even in collaborative or structured settings.

Competence: this is about the degree to which a person feels a sense of mastery or effectiveness, and that there is a confidence that they can overcome challenges or achieve goals. For the idea of competence to work effectively, then individuals require ongoing feedback and growth opportunities. Linked to professional development, this could take the form of allowing individuals to stretch their skills and receive supportive and useful feedback.

Relatedness: this is about an individual feeling connected to and respected by others and that a sense of belonging is created. Deci and Ryan believe that individuals need to feel that they are valued by those around them and that their contributions are valued. This viewpoint links to the importance of social support systems, mentorship and collaboration, but it also reinforces what was mentioned previously about social network theory (Wasserman and Faust, 1995; Carrington, Scott and Wasserman, 2005) and communities of practice (Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022) and their importance in the development journeys of individuals.

More recent ideas on self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2018) emphasise the practical application of the theory for the workplace. It can be used to enhance motivation and engagement for individuals through creating environments that support autonomy, competence and relatedness. It is possible to create greater autonomy through breaking down power-based hierarchies and devolving decision-making to a broader spread of individuals (again, these ideas link back to postmodern critiques of workplace operations and behaviours). By allowing individuals to pursue areas that resonate with their personal interests and goals you can increase autonomy and decrease cognitive dissonance. Managerial support plays an important role here, and rather than adopting traditional authoritarian management approaches, those managers who value the provision of constructive feedback and support, and that provide resources and ideas for the person to achieve success through their own autonomy, will be the ones that are particularly successful. In fact, Deci and Ryan suggest the idea of autonomy-supportive leadership, which encourages leaders to support the basic psychological needs of employees. They propose that by acknowledging employee perspectives, providing meaningful rationales and offering choice, employees will be more engaged and motivated. This can be particularly effective for professional development, as by understanding the professional interests and goals of individuals, they can facilitate development pathways that align with the aspirations of the individual. By encouraging employees to take responsibility and ownership of their personal development journey, rather than enforcing top-down generated ideas on what is important, we move more towards postmodern ideas of individualised, context-dependent growth, and that success and development can look, and should look, different for everyone.

It should be remembered that managers are also employees, and from this point of view they too can suffer from cognitive dissonance and this can influence the way they engage with staff (Holley, 2021). Those in positions of power may encounter feelings of psychological discomfort when they must make decisions or enforce policies that contradict their own values or their preferred management style. The result of the dissonance could be stress, indecision or discomfort, and it is easy to imagine how this could affect their performance as a leader. For instance, one interviewee, who has management responsibilities, suggested that:

> *'… it's idealistic… just do the best research you can, and that's what is important… But it is increasingly naïve… we are meant to be in competition with one another in these league tables. And that's what's meant to drive us. And I think it is a shame. And I resist that way of thinking about the world.'*
>
> (DBA14, p. 254)

This type of comment, and the underlying messages from the interviewees, highlighted this type of tension between a commitment to organisational objectives and those of being a supportive, empathetic and development focused manager. On a personal level, this has been difficult for me at times, where my values and principles have been compromised by decisions made in the hierarchical structure above me. I have been forced to make decisions or treat people in a way that causes me discomfort. This has been exacerbated because of my knowledge and experience across work psychology, human resource management and organisational behaviour as I am more familiar with what constitutes good and bad practice, and that can be a source of further frustration and increases the dissonant feelings. There are ways to mitigate this, suggested by Deci and Ryan, such as self-reflective processes, gaining support from mentors or colleagues, and aligning actions with long term goals. Whether operating as a manager, or in a non-managerial role, these principles can help employee effectiveness in the workplace, and we should be offering to support individuals to explore methods that take into account their contextual factors but also as a guide to offer development options (not to enforce them).

Theme: Adapting to Change: Flexibility and the Role of Time in Development

A regular theme that revolved around my discussions with interviewees, and that has also been evident in my experiences of working with and alongside academics, is the idea of time being both an enabler for development and a barrier. For instance, tasks take time and the time available each day to work on those tasks is limited. By investing in development, and potentially increasing efficiency or effectiveness, it is hoped that the investment an individual makes will pay dividends in the long term, particularly in generating additional spare time. However, the finite nature of time means that it is essential that it is used wisely as it can be a barrier as well as a benefit as tasks are often complex, take time to complete and rarely arrive on their own. This continuous battle between 'things to do' versus 'time to do it' can generate a feeling of time anxiety, the idea that there is never enough time, no matter how

hard you work or how long you work. Our experience of time is often fragmented by both personal and professional circumstances, and how a person manages time is simultaneously an individual experience and a co-constructed one. It is often a case of balancing your needs and requirements with those of others, both personally and professionally. This could be attending meetings, achieving deadlines, buying gifts for a loved one, making a family dinner, attending a nativity play. The list is endless. That feeling of time anxiety, maybe being overwhelmed, becomes critically important. If we were to section off and solely focus on what is required from a T&R staff member, even that could be overwhelming. It is not easy to balance the demands of the role, as it could include preparation for teaching, writing a grant proposal, marking assignments, preparing for a tv interview, submitting articles for publication, responding to student emails, conducting mandatory training, meeting with external parties to develop new research, and many other activities. I am not in a T&R role but just thinking about the long list of requirements for that job reinforces to me just how fragmented it is, but it also makes me feel anxious and I can feel my body tighten. It seems then, that to improve professional development for the better, then consideration needs to be given to how people think about, utilise and prioritise their time. As stated by one interviewee '…*personal development and support doesn't come by accident*' (DBA11, p.197)

Traditionally, people are taught from an early age on how to 'tell the time', read a clock face, and understand hours, minutes and seconds. From that point, our lives are filled with requests to have dinner at a particular time, attend a meeting for a set duration, or complete a task within a given number of hours. However, there are different ways to view time, and alternative perspectives can help individuals reinterpret and reshape how they use and experience it. Henri Bergson developed the concept of 'la durée', which translates as 'duration' (Bergson, 1946, 2004; Pearson and Mullarkey, 2002). He made a distinction between 'clock' time, where time is measurable and quantitative, and what he considered as 'lived' or 'experienced' time, which is subjective and fluid (Bergson, 2004, p. 108). Unlike linear clock time, duration suggests a constantly evolving, dynamic flow of moments, one that resists separation into discrete moments as it would lose its coherence. For Bergson, time is best understood as something experienced internally, and how we perceive it is influenced by our emotions, contexts and individual subjectivity. For example, if one were to spend an hour with a good friend time can pass swiftly, whereas waiting in a queue or enduring an awkward date can feel like much longer. While Bergson initially described time as a continuously flowing stream, a reservoir might better capture his view: a space where past, present, and future interact, merge, and influence each other. This reservoir holds our

experiences, memories, thoughts, and desires, all interwoven and constantly affecting one another. Within this continuous flow of consciousness, an individual is in a constant process of becoming, adapting, and evolving. Viewed in this way, professional development becomes an integral part of this ongoing evolutionary process, reflecting the complex and subjective nature of personal growth over time.

This idea of a constant flow, and the coalescence of past, present and future, represents a continuous process of change and transformation. Each moment builds upon and transforms the previous one and we can link that perspective to personal growth and development. Our experiences as individuals accumulate and evolve in a dynamic process where we are always 'becoming' rather than 'being'. This links to the ideas of identity presented earlier, that these are fractured and fluid, and that we are constantly reinterpreting ourselves, our past and our future. This supports the idea that growth is non-linear, and that professional development is fluid and ongoing. Individuals accumulate skills, knowledge and experience, and that we continuously build on and reinterpret this over time. These ideas resonate with Double Loop Learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Argyris, Putnam and McLain-Smith, 1985), a theory that emphasises the importance of questioning and reassessing one's underlying assumptions and norms. Unlike Single Loop Learning, which involves adapting actions within existing frameworks, Double Loop Learning encourages individuals to challenge the frameworks themselves, reflecting on the values and beliefs that they hold, and that guide their actions. This reflective, transformative, and non-linear process aligns with Bergson's (2004) concept of duration, as both involve a journey of adaptation and reinterpretation rather than fixed steps. Double Loop Learning's critical, questioning nature also mirrors key postmodern themes. Like postmodernism, it challenges stable, traditional structures and invites multiple perspectives, inviting individuals to reconsider foundational beliefs not just accept them. Development seen in this way is cyclical and recurring, where past experiences are layered, re-evaluated, and inform future actions. This mirrors Bergson's view that time cannot be broken into discrete parts without losing coherence. For professional development, Double Loop Learning suggests that real growth comes from ongoing, reflective adaptation, where individuals reshape their understanding and approach over time, embracing change and multiple viewpoints in a way that resonates with postmodern thought.

It is important to remember that while individuals have some control over their time, as Bergson (2004) suggests, there is also a level of control and pressure exerted by the organisations within which people work. This point underscored many of the conversation I

had with staff, with DBA12 suggesting that '…at that point … we had time to do professional development, and then gradually that was eroded away' (p.209). This highlights the pressures that form the context and forces around an individual. Career development, therefore, is not purely self-determined but is shaped by external influences that introduce both constraints and opportunities for growth. Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) offers an interesting perspective as it emphasises that individuals actively construct their career paths by adapting to changing circumstances. Within this theory adaptability is seen as a core competency for career development, and that growth is driven by a person's ability to make sense of and respond to environmental changes and challenges. There are four areas that Savickas identified as the psychological resources needed to navigate change successfully, these are:

> **Concern**: the individual's awareness of, and preparation for, the future. Concern involves thinking ahead and considering various pathways and development opportunities, and it is driven by motivation and intentionality.
>
> **Control**: the individual's sense of self-determination and agency over their career. Control emphasises taking responsibility, actively influencing career direction, and aligning career choices with personal values and goals.
>
> **Curiosity**: the individual's desire to explore and experiment, demonstrating openness to new experiences and diverse possibilities. Curiosity may be self-directed, aimed at learning more about oneself, or externally oriented, exploring different roles, sectors, and work environments.
>
> **Confidence**: the individual's belief in their ability to pursue and achieve career goals. Confidence requires self-assurance, resilience, and a trust in one's skills and competencies.

Together, these four dimensions encourage and empower individuals to build resilient, adaptable careers by focussing on both personal growth and external factors. Career Construction Theory aligns well with postmodern views as it favours a flexible, non-linear approach to career development, and it emphasises the contextual nature of growth. This perspective challenges traditional, linear models of career progression and supports postmodern ideas around professional development, such as it being individualised and dynamic, and that it is responsive to an individual's context and experiences.

Interestingly, some aspects of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2018) complement Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013). The former emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation and personal growth. While it's focus extends beyond career-specific contexts, its emphasis on autonomy and competence does parallel Savickas's focus on control and confidence. This suggests that intrinsic motivation and self-directed growth are essential for adaptability in career development. While Self Determination Theory does not explicitly address career adaptability, both theories highlight the importance of self-determination and resilience. This supports the idea that to help individuals thrive they need to develop a sense of agency and ownership over their developmental journey. Having worked across careers and recruitment, these elements resonate with me deeply, as I've seen firsthand how empowering others can help individuals construct meaningful and fulfilling career paths. When linked to professional development, it seems that Career Construction Theory can be a useful, practical and insightful framework. Particularly if it can help individuals recognise that growth within an organisation is both self-driven and contextually influenced.

The fluctuating and turbulent nature of organisations, and the need for individuals to effectively adapt to change, requires further exploration. The work of Kurt Lewin is particularly well-suited to this discussion (Lewin and Lewin, 1948; Lewin, 1952; Burke, 2002). Lewin originally presented his ideas on change in the 1940s, offering a framework for organisational change consisting of three stages: **unfreezing**, **changing**, and **refreezing**. These stages can be understood as (1) preparing individuals and organisations for change, (2) implementing the transition, and (3) stabilising the new state. Kotter (2012) expanded on Lewin's theorising to develop an eight-step model of change, reinforcing a linear and sequential approach to organisational change. However, Lewin's original work did not describe change as inherently sequential. Instead, his framework acknowledged the flexibility of change processes and recognised that individuals and organisations often move back and forth between stages. This appreciation for the fluid nature of change aligns with Bergson's concept of time, where change is viewed as continuous and dynamic, rather than linear.

Beyond Lewin and Kotter, other change models provide valuable perspectives. For example, the ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006) emphasises individual adaptation by focusing on *Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability,* and *Reinforcement* as critical stages for successful

change. This approach resonates with psychological aspects of adaptability, emphasising the role of individual motivation and capacity in navigating change. McKinsey's 7S Framework (Waterman, Peters and Phillips, 1980) offers a systemic perspective, suggesting that effective change requires alignment across multiple organisational elements, including strategy, structure, systems, and shared values. In contrast to structured, stage-based models, emergent change theories (e.g. Weick, 2000; Bushe and Marshak, 2014) emphasise that change often arises organically from interactions within the organisation. These approaches challenge linear models by highlighting the unpredictability of change and the need for ongoing adaptation. Postmodern critiques of change models further emphasise the limitations of structured approaches as value is placed on fluidity, subjectivity, and decentralised processes, not one-size-fits-all solutions. From this viewpoint, models like Kotter's may oversimplify the complexity of real-world organisational change. Instead, emergent theories align more closely with Bergson's ideas of time as a continuous flow and the non-linear nature of professional growth and adaptability.

The discussion around adaptability relates to one of the sub research questions (i.e. **SRQ3**: How does work experience, gained form outside HE, influence professional development?). Having worked across public, private and third sectors, and across roles that included training and developing staff, I am better able to spot areas where individuals fail to make the right connections and act on them. It was clear from the interviews that that academic staff had benefitted from experiences outside of the HE sector, either before moving into academia or during their time in academia. It is easy to imagine how a person's adaptability and effectiveness is greater when they have developed a broader set of skills and abilities, such as project management, leadership, strategic planning, or time management. Given the way people are shaped and developed over time, and the benefits that come from shared experiences, development in these areas becomes much more than an online time management training session, or a half day course spent learning about 'leadership essentials' (as a 'learner' in the traditional sense). Rather, it becomes more about offering opportunities to pick up these skills over time, giving people the opportunity to reflect on how previous experiences can shape development in the present and the future, and encouraging a self-realised form of agency in the developmental process that looks wider than typical offerings in universities. An idea that DBA1 mentioned was that the university should be '…saying to the community in Birmingham, or the West Midlands, if you want a member of staff to be on your board, or whatever, little charities, let us know. I think that would be good' (p.19). For instance, thinking back to the importance of networks discussed previously, particularly Social Network Theory (Wasserman and Faust, 1995) and CoP

(Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022), my development has been enhanced through the experience of running my own business, performing business development roles and understanding sales processes, but it also included working as a Non-Executive Director for a charity, and that was an excellent forum for applying the skills and knowledge I had gained. I immersed myself in these areas, learnt from others, through coaching, mentoring and CoP, and sought to enhance my experiences through performing roles across different sectors and role types. For me, the ability to communicate ideas on development, to encourage creativity and innovation, but to do this while being mindful of the needs, wants and aspirations of the individual, would encourage a more adaptable workforce and would align with postmodern views on how individuals develop.

There are plenty of theories on reflection and reflective practice, such as Schön's ideas on 'The Reflective Practitioner' (Schön, 1991), Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015), and Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988, 2013), which could be considered more traditional models that are often mentioned in the classroom. Less traditional theories that are relevant are Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), Narrative Reflection and Storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1988), as well as Archer's Internal Conversation and Reflexivity (Archer, 2003). These theories come from a range of research specialisms, and while diverse, there is connectivity worth considering. The idea of experience as an opportunity and learning mechanism is central to these theories as they refer to dynamic processes that allows for growth and sense-making. Within such theories reflection is central to learning, it generates a higher level of self-awareness and can aid development. Reflection can lead to fundamental shifts in perspective for an individual, and deep reflection can change how an individual feels about themselves, their context and their future actions. Archer (2003) believed that reflection allowed individuals to construct coherent stories and internal dialogues and that this process helps to create meaning. This idea of creating meaning is a central part of the theories mentioned here but also goes back to the ideas inherent in postmodernism. Understanding yourself, and the various identities you hold, is an important part of engaging in these types of reflective processes. For this to work well everyone should play an active role in defining and redefining themselves on a continuous basis. Again, we come back to the importance of context in helping shape that reflective process, and that social interactions, cultural norms and contextual factors all play a part in the formation of our reflective narratives. There is an understanding at the heart of all these theories that change, and adaptation is necessary, and while there may be different ways of approaching this, engagement in such processes is important and should be encouraged, but at the discretion of the individual to understand and choose what suits them.

Theme: Equity and Quality: Access to Professional Development Opportunities

Developing agency and taking ownership of one's own developmental pathway has already been discussed as an important element of being able to maximise individual potential. The ideas within the discussion of fractured identities, the benefits of utilising social networks, and that being reflective is a core element of personal growth remain important from a professional development perspective. However, there still needs to be thought given to how we ensure that opportunities are made available, that they are high in quality and that there is equity for staff when it comes to the distribution of funding, types of training, provision of new roles, mentorship and developmental conversations. If we pause here for a moment, and consider what a postmodern critique might be, then it could be we ask the question who decides on what 'quality' is? Should quality be assessed by the individual seeking to develop themselves, as often it is not? How can it be decided whether there is equity in professional development? If the goal is to move towards an inclusive and dynamic workplace, then we need to ask these questions, and we need to keep asking them, so that we can continuously negotiate successful outcomes for staff.

Principle 6 of the UN Global Compact is focused on 'Labour' and that 'Businesses should uphold the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation' (United Nations, 2024). It suggests that equity is about 'recognising that each person has different circumstances, that historically, some groups of people have experienced discrimination and that reaching equal outcomes will not be achieved by treating everyone the same. It requires the allocation of resources and opportunities according to circumstances and need (United Nations, 2024). Aston University has a policy that relates to equality and diversity (Billingham, 2024), but it makes no link to equity, rather it focuses on equality. While both have merit, as they represent approaches to fairness and justice, they are different. The words we use are important, and postmodern thinking can help us understand the way in which language can be considered fluid and that words individuals use help construct our own sense of reality. While equality suggests treating people in the same way, equity recognises the diversity of needs and circumstances. How we use language makes a difference to whether we obscure or illuminate the lived realities of individuals, and it can reinforce or generate a re-evaluation of power dynamics. By focussing solely on equality, it becomes easier to turn a blind eye to the systemic barriers that marginalised groups face,

and it is easier to convince oneself that applying the same brush to everyone is fair and just. In this way, we reinforce dominant norms rather taking the time to understand individual needs and to challenge those norms that are not fit for purpose. A focus on equity would be a step towards a more refined understanding of individual contexts and would further help to break down long standing inequalities.

These types of issues are discussed across postmodernist literature, for instance, in the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1990), where the suggestion is that it is common for institutions to reinforce a standardised approach to issues like equality and to overlook individual contexts. For Foucault issues around power, particularly in disciplinary environments (Foucault, 1977), is not just held by those in authority but rather, it comes through the language, discourse and practices used to control and categorise people. From my own experience, the university has over recent years been using different language, words or phrases that could be seen to exert more control through power structures. Words such as ‘pace’, ‘change’, and ‘pressure’ are much more common, as are words with more negative connotations, like ‘left’, ‘severance’, ‘retired’, ‘fit’ and ‘restless’, suggesting an environment that is much more turbulent and where staff either seem to move on or do not seem to belong. This is important for a discussion on equity as it becomes more important that people are treated in the right way and that it caters for their individual context. We can think of ‘Equality’ being used as means to justify the same resources, opportunities, and support being applied in the same way to all staff without any thought of differentiation. Postmodern thinkers are sceptical of overarching narratives, like this, that are at heart trying to apply a single solution to complex problems or situations. This is where the idea of ‘Equity’ can be particularly powerful, as we can challenge this generic approach, and show that a uniform solution is not sufficient. If the College is to truly succeed, and make the most of the individuals within it, then approaches need to be flexible, our policies adaptable and we need to elevate individual and diverse interests as the focus for attention.

If we use equity as the guiding light, and take account of individual contexts and experiences, we can consider how that would affect the development opportunities and support that are provided to individuals in the workplace. One interviewee felt particularly strongly about their own development, ensuring fairness for their journey, and that for that development to be effective there needed to be investment. Comments within the interviewees reflect the importance of this topic, such as ‘…*the literature says the*

productivity goes up if you invest in people' and '… *make sure you have open and transparent information*… *you need principles and data, and … fairness*' (DBA11, p.199). Others interviewees were much more explicit about the need to cater for individual circumstances, that fairness was missing from internal funding allocation, and that '… *this type of support … becomes exclusionary*' and that those with '*caring responsibilities'*, who have '*kids'* or need to look after '*an elderly person*', and that those that need '*a visa*' for travel, they are '*excluded*' (DBA7, p.128). While not explicit, there was a continuous undercurrent of frustration with the way systems work, and it was evident that while this was perceived by all, the strength of commentary was much more prevalent from female members of staff. From my own experiences, having been trained in employment law, developed policies around diversity, equity and inclusion, and been involved in the delivery of submissions for workplace awards, such as Athena Swan, work needs to be done to address inequity. For those people placed on the margins, and individuals that do not fit a standardised workplace view, we need to take the time and effort to make development equitable. This would require an investment of time and resources to develop individualised approaches to support, development and opportunity, and easy answers to do this do not exist, but it does not mean that we should not try. The first step is communication, challenging and deconstructing traditional views on development, and making an effort to understand the barriers that people face. Rather than be burdened by, and accept, traditional grand narratives we should move towards appreciating micro-narratives (Lyotard, 1979; Boje, 2001), i.e. the small, personal stories that are reflective of an individual's unique experience and perspective. These can be used to highlight moments and challenges that might allow us to move more towards equity and individual understanding.

As we move to confront issues around developing equity, not equality, and we utilise micro-narratives to understands individual issues and contexts, there is still a power imbalance that needs to be addressed. By doing so we can improve the provision, quality and distribution of resources and opportunities. With a current focus on equality it means that those in power are able to control the distribution of resources, such as funding allocation or time provision, and make decisions on what value is placed on the individual, the strength of their needs and the perceived benefit of investment. If it was possible to wave a postmodern wand, the result would be a decentralisation of power. It would also lead to a focus on empowering people to take charge of their own developmental journey, that trust would be placed in the decision-making abilities of colleagues, and that their individual contexts would drive the resources available to them to enable their success. For instance, for that person who needs

extra money to fund childcare that would enable conference attendance or to attend training, or the person from China or India who needs extra support to write good grant applications as English is not their first language, or the person that wants to learn a new skill and needs money to pay for the software. How can effective development be enabled when resources are controlled tightly, are distributed unilaterally, and those in power are too busy to listen to individual needs, or in a worse scenario they do not realise they need to listen.

It is not just the resources, and who controls them, that we need to consider either. There are similar issues with the provision of developmental opportunities at a college and university level. Who decides what training, development and learning opportunities are put in place? Someone in a position of power is making decisions on what training and development is put in place, and this will often be based on what is cost effective and what covers the broadest number of people possible. This type of approach is rooted in modernistic thinking where decision making is based on metrics and measurements, and the systems utilised are geared towards generating an efficient, effective and generic development plan to be applied to all. The approach would cater for the greatest number of people, where evaluation data would be captured, and we could justify expenditure based on numbers attended and how it linked to organisational imperatives. A postmodern approach would resent such systems and metrics, rejecting the top-down metric driven authoritarian view on development. and there would be a fight to value context, individuality and agency in the developmental process. The reality is that neither of those things happen. Rather, it seems like we are in a developmental purgatory, one where resources are slim (as often developmental activities are targeted first for budget cuts) and the ability to innovate, be responsive and understand individual needs has been lost. I am sure that there are examples of people being helped, and that their own context has been appreciated, but this is not the norm. We are an organisation that provides learning (to students) not a learning organisation (that values learning and the ability for its staff to engage with it).

Chapter Summary

This analysis chapter delves into the professional development landscape within academia through five key themes:

Adapting to Change: This theme examines time constraints and adaptability, emphasising the fluid, non-linear nature of academic roles. Drawing on Bergson's 'la durée' and Savickas' Career Construction Theory, it frames professional growth as an evolving, adaptive process, shaped by both individual and institutional influences.

Building Connections: Social network theory and communities of practice are explored to highlight the importance of relational networks for career progression and knowledge-sharing. The postmodern emphasis on decentralised, context-based learning underscores the role of informal support systems as critical for personal and professional development.

Empowered Growth: This theme investigates how personal agency and identity, using perspectives from Bandura, Giddens, and Archer, shape academics' career journeys. The chapter underscores how reflective practices and identity fluidity enable academics to navigate institutional demands, although tensions between roles, particularly teaching and research, persist.

Equity and Quality: Addressing professional development access, this theme critiques the focus on equality over equity in opportunities. Leveraging postmodern perspectives, it questions the power dynamics that shape resource distribution, arguing for a nuanced, context-sensitive approach to development that accounts for diverse individual needs.

Navigating Power and Tensions: This theme addresses external regulations like REF and TEF, showing how these frameworks create a metric-driven, performance-focused environment. It critiques the rigidity imposed by these metrics, viewing them as manifestations of modernist control that often limit true academic autonomy and creativity.

In summarising, this chapter illustrates the complexity of academic professional development, shaped by both external and internal factors. It reflects on how these influences impact individuals differently, calling for a more flexible, individualised approach that aligns with academics' unique contexts and evolving professional identities.

5. Discussion

Chapter Overview

This chapter will delve into topics surrounding the main analysis, areas that influenced the analysis and the original research questions will be considered. Given the shifting and mutating nature of research within this this design the suitability of the original research questions will be considered and ideas presented on whether they should change given the content generated as part of the reflexive thematic analysis. Towards the end of the chapter there will be a discussion around the limitations of the research.

The mutable nature of research questions

The term mutable means something 'that can change' or is 'likely to change' (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2024). Applying this to the research questions in this study, claiming they are mutable, might cause raised eyebrows among colleagues who align with ontologies such as realism or critical realism. In fact, it would have caused past versions of me to be quizzical about how such a statement could be made. The belief that there is a singular, objective truth, waiting to be uncovered through rigorous and scientific investigation is the driver behind those viewpoints, and a belief I was encouraged to hold in my earlier years of development. However, my view of the world, and by extension this study, is grounded in relativism. This ontological position asserts that reality is not singular or fixed, but rather a product of human interaction and context. There is no one 'truth' or reality; both are contingent, context-bound, and constantly shifting (Silverman, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Flick, 2023)..

Braun and Clarke (2022b, p. 173) emphasise that within relativism, 'there is no final arbiter of truth; truth is what is developed from the analysis, supported by the data, and demonstrated through scholarly processes.' This perspective is essential to understand the relativist ontology of this work, which, although critiqued in some circles, particularly around materiality and morality, forms the foundation of this study. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2022b) stress that combining relativism with RTA requires a critical viewpoint, as the task is subjective, contextual, and anti-foundational, as there is no single truth. Rather, the objective is to provide a partial reading of the dataset, demonstrating how participants make sense of their realities within their specific contexts. Unlike objectivist studies that seek an accurate

version of events, our role is to interpret, make meaning, and explain why certain insights are significant.

This approach has important implications for the research questions that were established at the beginning of this study:

> **MRQ1**: How do academic staff perceive their own professional development?
> **SRQ1**: How does the person's understanding of external regulations/requirements shape individual professional development, either directly or indirectly?
> **SRQ2**: What tensions exist between the delivery of teaching and research?
> **SRQ3**: How does work experience, gained from outside HE, influence professional development?
> **SRQ4**: How does the experience level of academic staff influence professional development?

While these questions provided a valuable guide for the research, the fluid and inductive nature of both the context and my research methodology means that the interpretation of these questions, and perhaps even their relevance, may shift. Through my RTA, which is grounded in postmodern and relativist perspectives, a space opens for the research questions to evolve based on the data that has been co-constructed and interpreted. In the sections that follow, I will consider each research questions in turn, discussing their relevance given the themes interpreted within the RTA, reflecting on whether they remain valid given participant insights, and considering how they might be reframed. This reflexive and adaptive approach, grounded in both RTA and a relativist ontology, ensures that the research questions are not static but are flexible to accommodate the fluidity of academic experiences and the contextual realities of professional development.

MRQ1: How do academic staff perceive their own professional development?

This is the primary research question, and it still has relevance as it is what drove the research originally. Each of the themes link back to this question but one of the overriding areas that people talked about was time, but their discussion around time had many different formats. This is interesting as if we just said 'time' a person may jump to a particular conclusion, rather than deconstructing the different elements related to 'time' from my interpretation of the interviews. Traditionally, an academic from my experience will say that

‘they do not have time’ and this was discussed at length across many interviews, at both semantic and latent levels. It is worth exploring the different ways that time was expressed and alluded to, and how they link back to postmodern issues about power, agency, identity and fluidity.

The influence of time in the workplace

The first point is that time for development had not been specified at the time of the interviews. It seems there was an expectation that people should improve on a regular basis, even though there are so many different aspects to the role of a T&R focussed academic contract. The metrics and measurements being used to measure success, driven by organisational imperatives, provide both implicit and explicit suggestions that individuals need to improve what they were doing. Those that measure research, wanted more research outputs, those that measure teaching, wanted more teaching feedback success, and those that measure administration wanted things to be on time and to a high level of quality. Yet, there was little mention of how support had been provided to help them succeed as individuals. Yes, there was some training provided, or cases of mentoring, but very little of the conversations held suggested that individual needs, desires, aspirations or context were acted upon. In fact, they did not seem to be considered at all. There was no time allocated officially for development and there was little, or no time invested in discussion around development. Conversations with managers had a performance management focus, rather than a developmental one. Training, coaching, mentoring, and development generally cost time, money or both usually. A postmodern perspective might suggest that this is a power play by management to keep the status quo and to maintain momentum in making staff work harder. You might wonder whether management believe that staff are more compliant when they are under pressure, or that they worry that listening and responding to staff needs would make them more demanding. A Marxist view (Marx, 1996) on performance management would be that the bourgeoisie (management) are maintaining control over the proletariat (workers), so the means of production remained intact. This links back to postmodern critiques of the workplace surrounding issues of power and control, a core component of discussions across the research (Foucault, 1977, 1990; Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1979; Foucault and Gordon, 1980). By exerting control through mechanisms like development opportunities, management can keep staff in check and maintain control in a way that matches organisational goals rather than focussing on helping individuals achieve personal goals.

The pressures that surround individuals in an organisation can come from varying directions, and we have discussed above how they can be used to force behaviours from staff that align with organisational expectations. The idea of being a good citizen, although nebulous as a concept, is driven by expectations that staff should volunteer for different activities internally, usually on top of their normal workload, and that staff should build esteem for the university through external activities. Such activities, up until recently, were expected as part of the job but not officially recognised in the contracts or workload of employees. This has changed recently to some extent, through the introduction of a new workload management system, but the number of hours attributable to such activities like citizenship, continued professional development and external engagement are all low. For instance, continued professional development works out at about just over 1 hour per week. In a week where people work many more hours than they are expected to, even that 1 hour is hard to find. So, thinking from a postmodern point of view, I would question whether this is merely just a case of lip service. The organisation can say that they are giving time for that activity, but in reality, those that control the power within the organisation will know that it is unlikely to form part of staff activities in the role, yet they will be able to say ‘well, we gave you time for development’. How can it be a realistic proposition for staff when individual contexts are not considered, where the workload management system is a broad-brush approach to managing staff time and effort and that the opportunities given to people are not fair, just or considered. Given that the time for CPD also includes mandatory training, courses that are not usually geared to developing the person professionally, or if they are it is certainly not provided to meet the needs or desires of the individual, it really does seem like this is a case of lip service rather than a new innovative way to work towards a development culture or learning organisation.

For professional development to be effective, then there needs to be a shared commitment to utilising coaching, mentoring, training or sharing expertise, but all these activities take time. Even just casually discussing a topic with a colleague or delivering a seminar to others takes time. When employees feel that they do not have the time to complete the basic tasks of their job, how can they be expected, or be motivated, to find time to develop those around them. There seems to be a missing piece of the development jigsaw when it comes to encouraging people to be active in developing others. There is a desire to do so, particularly from more experienced staff, but where do staff find time for developing others unless they go above and beyond their normal working hours and is it fair to take time away from friends, family and personal pursuits to achieve this. Even though a new highly detailed workload model has been introduced at Aston University (Khan, 2024) over the last 6 months, there is

no time specified to give individuals the ability to develop others around them. This would likely be placed under the header of citizenship, but there is only so much that can fit into that set time allocation, and it would be easy to overload citizenship in terms of expected activities. A postmodern view on development would value the social construction of knowledge, learning through others and giving people agency to find development opportunities. This is hard to achieve when such prescriptive measures, like workload systems, are constraining individuals.

The traditional view of time as linear leads to a natural inclination to make activities and experiences faster, more efficient and to tick it off the list. This idea fits with western thinking that appreciates metrics and values time by what is accomplished, not by the quality of the time spent. The new workload management system values activities in terms of time spent, rather than any link to quality or the individual completing the task; it is purely 'x' activity takes 'y' time. There is no differentiation, no understanding of individual abilities or needs, just a broad blanket approach. For those who have needs, such as those who are neurodiverse, or those where English may be a second language, there is no thought given to an individualised approach to the formal systems in place. The idea of time, as suggested by Bergson (2004), could be used as a developmental tool for staff to think about time differently. It could help individuals change their value system around their view and use of time, encouraging them to live in the moment, connect with colleagues and co-construct opportunities for knowledge sharing, skill development and social learning. Unless a way is found to break away from the broad-brush systems that are used to homogenise the experiences of staff we are going to be left with systems and boundaries that are unfair and developmentally problematic.

The shadow of Covid

An important area for consideration, but that did not come out in the themes as part of the RTA, was the influence of Covid. At the time of the interviews, it was a shadow that would have had influence on the conversations and thoughts of individuals during interviews. It is not often that the whole world suffers from the same phenomena, and effects of Covid can still be felt, even four years on, though to a lesser extent. What was clear during the interviews was that Covid had a pronounced effect on the way people worked, the way they interacted and their sense of autonomy in a highly pressurised environment. Work suddenly shifted from being office based to online, and there was a gap between what was expected of individuals versus what they received in terms of training, development and workload.

Workload increased as academic staff shifted from teaching in person to teaching online, materials had to be redesigned for an online audience, and the knowledge and skill levels needed to produce online materials increased, as engaging online learners is different to engaging them in person, and learning and teaching digitally is also different. There was little done to support people in this regard. Management was quick to articulate their expectations and were clear about the goals for what were to be achieved, but they did not provide the training, development and resources to effectively and efficiently reach those aspirations.

While the themes presented as part of the RTA do not explicitly reference Covid, there are links to it. For instance, the ideas and areas captured in the theme based around navigating power and tension were heightened during this period, as there was increased pressure on the university to perform within challenging circumstances, and a need to maintain the same high standards that were previously outlined by outside parties, such as the QAA. How the university reacted and responded to Covid would be measured, internally and externally (QAA, 2020b, 2020a; Research Excellence Framework, 2020). The eyes that would usually scrutinise areas of the university's performance, were more focused than ever, and that increased the pressure that already existed and would naturally trickle down to staff members. Additionally, the effect of Covid during this period links to how staff engage with relational networks and social support (Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022). Suddenly, the social systems and support structures that are essential for individual success were challenged and changed. No longer would you see people in the office, the casual conversations by the printer stopped, and the ability to pick up information by osmosis disappeared. Conversations and liaisons like these are a lynchpin for socially constructed development and staff no longer had access to it, or if they did it was in a limited format. Staff adopted new ways of working, such as using Microsoft Teams, so that people could communicate within some form of organisationally provided infrastructure. Rather than casually chatting to someone in the corridor, or spontaneously arranging to go for coffee with a colleague, social interactions were now based around digital interaction, were less spontaneous and more scheduled, and they tended to be focussed conversations rather than general chit chat. From my own experience conversations were more polite as people often refused to randomly call colleagues, relying on scheduled interactions, and asking if someone was free to talk, and they were more transactional, rather than the wider ranging personal conversations that would happen in the office. It is easy to understand how this happened, as people felt more pressured, and they perceived that they had less time. Even after four years the shadow of Covid still affects the way that we communicate and interact in the workplace. People are on campus less, therefore in-person interaction points are

reduced, and the sense of community, the social nature of work and the ability to support each other all continue to be hampered. Life and work may never be the same as they were pre-Covid, but the way we adapt to our new context should be improved, and one channel to do that could be professional development activities and initiatives.

Another element worth picking up on here was the organisational reaction of Covid, and the perceived lack of care the organisation had for the welfare of staff. The messaging and directives came from a desperation to get people back into the classroom, both staff and students, even when there was still a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. This push for a return to normality is particularly interesting if you view this from a postmodern perspective (Foucault, 1977; Foucault and Gordon, 1980), with a focus on power dynamics, as those making decisions were often not the ones risking increased exposure to Covid by going into classrooms, taking regular walks through buildings, and entering lifts with the staff and student population. There might have been good reasons why this approach was taken, but the perceived lack of care for staff and students can decrease a person's engagement with the organisation and their commitment to it. Our post Covid world continues to be different, and it is likely to always be different. Postmodern thinking (Lyotard, 1979) resonates with this period strongly, as ideas around change being continual, and circumstances being fluid, have really hit over the last four years. The identities we have developed alongside Covid, or as a reaction to it, and how we view ourselves and our lives, have changed over that period, sometimes dramatically. While this could be expected in hindsight, the more disappointing element here is the low levels of perceived empathy that staff feel they have received from the organisation with DBA5 referring to the management style as '*command and demand*' (p.102) rather than supportive and empathetic. The optimistic part of me hopes that with hindsight, the organisation would do things differently. However, I am not sure that would be the case as there is still a disconnect between the words and rhetoric used by those in positions of power, versus the experiences and expectations of staff regarding care, consideration and wellbeing. It is conceivable that the themes presented through the RTA may have been different pre-pandemic, and this could be a limitation of the study, but when thinking about this from a postmodern perspective (e.g. Foucault, 1977; Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1979; Foucault and Gordon, 1980), the themes presented are likely be exactly the same, it is just they may have been more powerfully displayed.

The provision of professional development

Another important area to consider is this sense that staff expected the university to look after their professional development for them. It is as if staff wait for the University to provide them with the opportunities they need to develop, and without realising that what they will be provided with will be grounded in what the University believes is important, not what the individual needs or wants. This links back to the theme centred around empowered growth and developing personal agency for career development. Understanding one's development needs, and deciding on personal aspirations and goals, is a work in progress for many but it is essential that staff take more ownership of their developmental journey. It is surprising that in the previous section there has been a discussion about the perceived lack of care and empathy the university demonstrates for individuals, particularly during and post Covid, and yet there seems to be a belief that the university will care about their professional development. Perhaps there is a need for increased self-awareness, and the development of it, so that staff can take more control of how they develop their careers but also be more mindful of power dynamics within the workplace.

A related area, and one that seemed to generate animosity when discussed, was the promotions process. There seemed to be a perception that the process was unfair and that it kept changing. While it is easy to see that this could be frustrating, it links back to ideas presented earlier on embracing fluidity and understanding the different identities that operate within each of us when conducting our work. It may be that it is the inability for individuals to cope with change and ambiguity that is the important factor here, as people are unlikely to be able to change organisational decisions around promotions and performance, but an individual can modify the way they embrace, react to and utilise the change around them and fluctuations in their personal context. It is something I have had to reflect on during my journey completing the doctorate, and while I am generally comfortable with change, and embrace opportunities, it has still been difficult for me at times. For instance, the university has changed performance management processes a few times over the last few years. Whatever format it takes the implementation of it has been disappointing, as there is a lack of connection between the reasons for change and the implementation of new systems, and there is poor engagement from managers and staff. Therefore, there are difficulties in design, delivery, and development, and as someone who has developed performance management procedures previously, and teaching students about such processes, these problems feel much more personal and frustrating for me. This is particularly relevant for this research, as the system conflates development and performance management. Given the

traditional western values and philosophically modern approach that underlies these processes it is the metrics and measurements of performance that win out, rather than a focus on developmental goals, personal aspirations, career enhancing resources and reducing developmental barriers that one might hope to see discussed in developmental conversations with a manager.

SRQ1: How does the person's understanding of external regulations/requirements shape individual professional development, either directly or indirectly?

This sub question, particularly from a postmodern perspective, remains relevant and important. In the context of HE, external regulations such as the REF, TEF and KEF play a pivotal role in shaping professional development. These are the drivers at a macro level that help shape and form the goals, ambitions and directions of universities, for good or for bad. From a postmodern perspective, these frameworks can be seen as instruments of institutional power that shape not only what counts as professional development but also how academics view themselves and their work. These ideas link back to the theme 'Navigating Power and Tensions: Organisational Dynamics in Development' in particular, but it does shape and influence equity, opportunity and professional identity. This suggests that while it is important to consider themes in their own right, they influence and shape each other, and that context is complex.

Constructing Meaning in a Framework-Driven World

Participants expressed mixed feelings about the frameworks that drive the activities of both staff and the institution. While some saw these frameworks as necessary, most reflected on how they felt pressured or constrained by external demands. As I interpreted their reflections, it became clear that these frameworks often imposed a narrow view of what professional success should look like. For instance, REF was often discussed as a dominant force, carrying more institutional weight compared to TEF or KEF, which were perceived as less impactful or important. This mirrors my own experiences when overseeing the College Research Office. REF dominated discussions at senior management meetings, sidelining metrics like TEF and KEF, as they were rarely given the same level of attention. Staff members were often categorised as "REF-able" or not "REF-able," a reductionist approach towards people that overlooked their contributions, career pathways, and potential.

This categorisation became shorthand for describing the value of staff and reveals an alignment with neoliberal agendas, ones that emphasise performativity, competition, and economic utility within higher education (Ball, 2003; Olssen and Peters, 2005). REF, for example, frames academic worth in terms of measurable outputs, and it privileges narrowly defined metrics over broader contributions. While submission to REF2021 was governed by contract type and an institutional code of practice rather than perceived ability, using terms like “REF-able” highlights how institutional priorities reduce ideas around professional identity to externally validated outputs. This type of reductionism ignores individual contexts and challenges and reinforces inequitable structures, particularly around recognition and reward (Shore and Wright, 2015). From a postmodern perspective, it seems that grand narratives are a persistent and pervasive force when considering academic evaluation, particularly the need to equate value with quantifiable achievements (Lyotard, 1979).

Postmodern critiques urge individuals to look beyond surface-level understandings of frameworks like REF and TEF. These types of frameworks not only dictate what counts as “good” or “excellent” within research or teaching, but they shape how academics construct their professional identities. By privileging certain outputs, these frameworks maintain institutional power dynamics that align with neoliberal agendas, where measurable success links closely to institutional survival and market competitiveness (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism in higher education drives universities to prioritise frameworks like REF because they align with broader economic factors, including funding allocations, rankings, and reputation (Ball, 2003).

For example, one participant remarked, ‘*… well, REF, yeah, REF, obviously dictates what you do, to an extent, in research… obviously, REF to an extent dictates what you write as well.*’ (DBA12, p. 220). This statement highlights how professional identity can be shaped by institutional priorities rather than intellectual curiosity or personal aspirations. Lyotard (1979) critiques these types of mechanisms as they commodify knowledge and similarly Foucault (1977) suggests how frameworks, like these, function as disciplinary tools to shape behaviour and enforce institutional goals. The tension between institutional demands and individual agency resonates strongly with participant reflections, and these frameworks create an environment where success is narrowly defined with little room for diverse forms of academic contribution or career development.

These reflections suggest a need for increased reflexivity, at an institutional and individual level, when engaging with these frameworks so that together we can move beyond reliance

on metrics-driven evaluation. For instance, embracing practices that value teaching excellence, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration could help reframe professional identity, so it aligns more effectively with individual aspirations and institutional values. From a postmodern perspective, this involves challenging the grand narratives embedded in academic frameworks and championing multiple forms of success. This would help promote a culture of inclusivity and diversity where there is a focus on the individual in professional development. Institutions could more effectively balance the demands of external frameworks and internal goals, while fostering environments where staff can flourish personally and professionally.

Professional Development as a Form of Resistance

Interestingly, some participants showed signs of resistance to regulatory pressures. While they acknowledged the need to comply, they also carved out space for professional development that aligned with their own interests or personal values. In this way, professional development became a source of agency, where participants negotiated between institutional demands and their own needs for personal growth.

From a postmodern viewpoint, this reflects the fluidity of identity and development. Participants were not passive subjects under the control of these frameworks; rather, they engaged in subtle acts of resistance and adaptation. For example, one academic discussed how they dedicated time to mentoring younger staff, an activity that wasn't highly rewarded in REF but was deeply meaningful to them. This highlights a key postmodern critique—professional development is not a singular or universal process, but a constantly negotiated and constructed reality.

The Role of QAA: A Missing Framework in Academic Development

Despite its foundational importance in shaping the quality of HE (Quality Assurance Agency, 2024), the QAA appears notably absent in guiding professional development for academic staff. The QAA provides vital benchmarks and standards designed to secure quality for student learning experiences, emphasising curriculum design, assessment, and teaching practices. However, in practice, there is a focus on frameworks and metrics, such as REF, at the expense of sidelining or overlooking QAA's focus on teaching quality and student outcomes.

The omission of QAA's guidelines as an anchor in academic development may have several implications. For one, it could suggest a misalignment between what academics are encouraged to prioritise in their development and the holistic needs of students, who ultimately benefit from a balanced investment in both teaching and research quality. This absence potentially contributes to a gap in development around student-centred pedagogy, meaning that academics are less equipped to meet QAA standards or may only engage with them at a superficial level, addressing them reactively rather than through proactive professional growth. Furthermore, without embedding QAA principles in development frameworks, institutions might implicitly convey that teaching-focused skills are secondary to research capabilities, reinforcing the broader trend of privileging research over teaching in academic career pathways. This oversight calls for a re-examination of how professional development frameworks can better integrate QAA's principles to foster balanced, quality-oriented growth for academic staff and to align it more effectively with the progression gateways imposed through our link to Advance HE professional levels, such as Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow.

Complexities of Professional Identity: The Influence of Professional Bodies

Another layer of complexity emerges in academic identity formation when considering the role of professional bodies. Professional bodies often provide standards, certifications, and ongoing development requirements for academics associated with fields that have distinct practical and ethical expectations, such as psychology, law, or engineering. For academics with dual responsibilities, to both their institution and their professional body, this dual allegiance can create tension in prioritising development goals. Academics might feel obligated to meet the demands of both institutional standards (e.g., TEF, REF) and those required for professional accreditation, such as CPD (Continuous Professional Development) mandates from bodies like the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) or British Psychological Society (BPS). It is a challenge I have faced personally as I am pulled in different directions. There is a need to demonstrate varying experiences and skills, depending on where your professional allegiance may lie, and consideration will need to be given to whether there is a pecking order of importance, and whether that order changes depending on your identity or context at the time.

The added demands from professional bodies can lead to confusion and potentially a fragmented sense of professional identity, as individuals navigate what it means to be both a scholar and a practitioner. For instance, academics may feel pressured to balance the

rigorous expectations of their professional body with the research or teaching goals imposed by their institution, creating a sometimes-conflicting array of professional identities. This multifaceted identity landscape challenges the idea of a unified professional self and highlights the need for development frameworks that acknowledge and support the multiple roles many academics must fulfil. Incorporating structured guidance on managing these layered identities could enhance resilience and adaptability among academic staff, ensuring they feel supported not only in institutional goals but also in their obligations to professional communities beyond academia.

SRQ2: What tensions exist between the delivery of teaching and research?

In academia, teaching and research are often framed as two pillars of an academic's professional life, yet participants frequently reflected on the tensions between the two. It was one of the reason's this research interested me, as I could recognise the tension in others before commencing the doctorate, as it seemed to be a regular topic of difficulty when I talked to colleagues. My interpretation of these discussions highlights how institutional priorities often force academics to navigate conflicting demands in particular ways and the Franz (2009) model helps to shine a light on the many conflicting areas that vie for attention in the life of an academic. So, this question remains relevant, but on reflection the question needs to be wider, perhaps 'What tensions exist for an academic on a teaching and research contract?'. It is only a small adjustment, but it allows for the wider range of activities, and conflicts, that an individual faces in delivering the role.

The Hierarchical Nature of Academic Roles

Several participants noted that research is often privileged over teaching, external engagement, administration and management roles, despite institutional rhetoric about the importance of these and other areas. This hierarchy, where research sits above everything else, was deeply felt by academics. There is a rhetoric used that people should excel in all areas, which is problematic (and unrealistic), but often it is research that is rewarded more through promotions and recognition regardless of what is said. For example, one participant reflected, '…*we give lip service to the idea that people will be promoted on the basis of… anything other than research outcomes*.' (DBA14, p.251) This perception is not just a semantic understanding of interview comments, it is constructed by the underlying power dynamics inherent in academic institutions, where research is tied to institutional funding and

status. In previous discussions with colleagues, we have jointly considered how it is possible to build a global reputation within research and develop yourself as a name in a particular niche. However, in teaching for instance, that is much harder, maybe even impossible. It would certainly be hard to develop an international reputation for being a good manager or good administrator in academia.

Postmodernism provides us with suggestions on how to critique this type of unequal power structure, where one form of work (research) is valued more than others (e.g. teaching), despite the institutional and societal rhetoric regarding what activities are important. The disconnect between what is said and the reality of the situation contributes to fragmented academic identities. During the interviews, there was a sense of frustration, where participants felt overwhelmed by the variety of expectations regarding performance, particularly when in receipt of insufficient institutional support. This disconnect is not merely frustrating, it represents a structural issue deeply embedded within academic institutions. Institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) suggests that universities, to maintain legitimacy within the broader academic landscape, emulate other institutions by prioritising research. This alignment is strategic, given that research productivity directly influences institutional status, funding, and prestige. Consequently, universities may publicly endorse the importance of teaching, engagement, and administration but, in practice, often attribute resources and rewards into research to mirror external expectations and reinforce their position in national and global rankings. This emphasis signals to academics that, despite institutional claims of valuing all roles equally, research remains the most valued, creating an unspoken hierarchy of tasks that reinforces existing power dynamics.

For academics in this study, especially when their own professional identity is rooted in teaching, student engagement, or service roles, this type of discrepancy can lead to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). The psychological tension referred to here arises from the mismatch between their personal values and the institutional reality, one that elevates research above all else. The dissonance created put a strain on individual identity and creates an internal conflict that can affect job satisfaction, motivation, and overall well-being. Academics often feel compelled to conform to institutional priorities by focusing on research, even when this undermines their genuine interest in teaching or mentorship. Further complicating this picture, institutional betrayal theory (Smith and Freyd, 2014) highlights the sense of abandonment academics experience when their institutions fail to uphold stated values. By consistently promoting research at the expense of other roles, universities can inadvertently erode trust, leaving academics feeling unsupported in their

broader professional goals. The emphasis on research aligns with institutional goals but contradicts the broader mission of HE to foster diverse forms of knowledge, teaching quality, and community engagement. This sense of betrayal undermines the institutional commitment to its academics, who feel that the reality of their work is neither fully valued nor supported.

By utilising the work of Foucault (Foucault, 1977; Foucault and Gordon, 1980), we can address the power dynamics at play, where universities define and control what counts as valuable knowledge. Research is elevated not merely for its intellectual merit but because it reinforces institutional power, prestige, and alignment with societal norms favouring measurable outcomes and 'impact.' By privileging research, the institution enforces a hierarchy of knowledge that perpetuates traditional academic power structures, restricting the agency of academics who wish to prioritise teaching or other non-research roles.

SRQ3: How does work experience, gained from outside HE, influence professional development?

This is an interesting question for me as I realised over time that colleagues who had gained external experiences outside of HE tended to be the people I enjoyed working with most, and I was keen to explore this reflection further. Research shows (see Literature Review) that there are skills that are generated outside of HE that are particularly useful within HE. The question remains relevant and the answers to it could be useful when thinking about the development opportunities that are provided for staff. More so, when this view is extended past skill development, or improved domain knowledge, its usefulness is more pronounced. It is possible to construct links between this idea and each of the themes interpreted within this research. Those links can be traced back to a foundational need to increase understanding of oneself, their individual context, the different personal and professional identities they hold, and familiarisation with the diversity of cultures, climates and people one interacts with in different work settings. When I reflect on my experiences, the different places I have worked have formed a rich tapestry of skills, abilities, reflections and approaches, all of which have increased my adaptability and ability to connect. An interesting aspect of the interviews conducted was a noticeable tension between personal experiences and institutional expectations. Previous roles outside academia had equipped individuals with skills, abilities and approaches that were not always recognised or valued within the academic context, and this led to an underlying sense of frustration that permeated discussions. Certainly, from my own perspective I have found that a frustrating

process, particularly the disconnect between teaching people about best practice people management and not recognising the application of best practice within the university.

Marginalised Skills and Expertise

Interviewees who had experience from industry or other non-academic sectors demonstrated a sense of frustration that the skills or knowledge they had gained, often pragmatic, hands-on, or collaborative, were somewhat underutilised or marginalised within the university. From a postmodern perspective, this is an example of how certain types of knowledge are devalued based on the dominant discourses within HE. The knowledge that 'counts' in academia is often theoretical or tied to research outputs, while practical skills are sidelined. It would also be easy to imagine that those with a more rounded knowledge base and a breadth of experience from different workplaces may be more critical, as they have a greater pool of information from which to compare, contrast and critique from, and I wonder whether that makes HE a more difficult place to work for them. Certainly, in my own experience, having a range of knowledge, skills and abilities that you are motivated to apply at work, but then do not get the chance to do so, even though you know it could be useful, can be frustrating.

For someone in that situation, and for them to be able to reconcile that situation psychologically, it would be easy for them to withdraw their interest or engagement in the organisation to reduce the dissonance. So, by ignoring or supressing those individuals, and denying them the opportunity to contribute fully to the organisation, you miss the opportunity to improve the organisation, but you also potentially alienate staff that can offer increased benefit. Having a more diverse workforce, one that embraces skills and experiences from outside HE, or at least on the periphery, can be beneficial. One participant directly commented on this, posing the question '…should we recruit more people from, you know, non-academic backgrounds, or who have had outside experience? I think this is important.' (DBA18, P.321). There is a realisation that the skills developed and enhanced from experiences not available within HE, or at least not easily, can be particularly useful. However, it is also important to consider, like the person referenced above, that while it is good to generate diversity of experience, you do not want to create a narrative that only people with such additional experiences can succeed. This brings us back to the postmodern view that the focus should be on the individual, celebrating what they offer as part of their context, and encouraging confidence and agency in their own development agenda. By understanding and celebrating the strengths of the individual there can be

organisational and individual benefits, such as improved processes, higher commitment and a more collegiate and engaged workforce.

Finding Spaces for Alternative Growth

Some participants found ways to integrate their external experiences into their academic roles, particularly in mentoring, collaborative projects or the sharing of ideas from practice or industry with colleagues. For instance, colleagues may set up sessions that help others to improve their teaching practices, and while that would have a positive effect on students, it may not necessarily improve the metrics or measurements the university is interested in. In this case, it was done because there was a perceived need, and it had benefits for the group. This links back to the idea that CoP (Wenger and McDermott, 2002; Wenger, 2022) manifest by bringing together people with shared interests and ideas, not because the university believes there should be a community of practice. This ability to find ways to grow reminds me of finding flowers growing in the most random places, that despite the odds, they have found a way to grow, and even thrive. The question to ask here then is how we provide a space for colleagues to grow, for them to find new ways to flower, while making that process as easy as possible, by providing the right support, encouraging a diversity of ideas, and placing a focus on individual needs being met. This reflects the postmodern critique of grand narratives, the idea that there is no one ‘correct’ path for professional development. Instead, individuals construct their own narratives of growth, often resisting the dominant institutional discourses that devalue their external experience, limit growth to organisational needs or that stifle growth all together.

SRQ4: How does the experience level of academic staff influence professional development?

Experience level emerged as a significant factor in shaping how academic staff perceive and engage with their professional development. From early-career academics who are still establishing their identities, to senior staff navigating leadership roles, each career stage introduces different developmental challenges and priorities. The dynamics of power and identity play a crucial role in how professional development is understood and pursued across different career stages.

Early-Career Academics: Struggles with Identity Formation

Many early-career participants expressed feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, both in relation to their career paths and their professional identities. This phase of academic life was often described as one filled with pressure, to publish, to gain teaching experience, and to align with institutional expectations, all while trying to define themselves as academics.

From a postmodern perspective, this reflects the fluidity and fragmentation of identity. Early-career academics often find themselves caught between competing demands, such as producing high-quality research, excelling in teaching, and contributing to administrative roles. These competing demands create conflict between their personal aspirations and the institutional structures they are expected to navigate. For example, one participant shared,

> *'Okay, so I would say in the early days, there was overlap because my first I think, generally speaking, for most of us, when you are new into role, your first concern is really finding out what on earth you're doing, and hoping that you get reasonably good at it before everyone realises that you're an imposter.'*
>
> (DBA10, p.180)

There is a tension and confusion here that demonstrates how early-career academics are often trying to navigate a range of different tasks, understanding what they should be doing and generally finding their place and identity in the workplace. There is also potential conflict between what the person believes that role to be, what their values are, and institutional expectations. This struggle with imposter syndrome, a sense of not belonging or not being good enough to meet institutional standards, is a particular worry. This phenomenon can be understood as a reflection of power dynamics in academia, where early-career staff often feel that they are being judged by the same criteria as more experienced colleagues, despite having had less time to develop their skills.

Mid-Career Academics: Navigating Institutional Pressures

For mid-career academics, professional development was often framed around managing institutional pressures while balancing the increasing responsibilities of teaching, research, and administrative duties. This group is often tasked with navigating the tensions between meeting external performance metrics (such as REF) and personal or professional growth goals that might not align with these institutional priorities. It seemed that mid-career participants felt that they were caught in a liminal space, not early-career, but not yet senior either. This stage of their career brought with it both opportunities and challenges. On one

hand, they had gained confidence in their roles and were often more selective about how they invested their time and energy. On the other hand, they were increasingly aware of the institutional power structures that shaped their development opportunities and how difficult it could be to move through the promotion structure and hierarchy.

One participant reflected, '*I absolutely get that the University sets the strategy, which we're trying to help deliver, in terms of research and, but, I occasionally need to push back and say this isn't the way to achieve this.*' (DBA14, p.258). This comment resonates with a postmodern critique of institutional power, one that encourages academics not to be passive recipients of institutional directives. Rather, staff should engage in acts of resistance and negotiation as they carve out spaces for their own development.

For mid-career academics, professional development included an increasing focus on leadership roles. Many participants expressed a growing sense of responsibility for mentoring junior staff or taking on more strategic roles within their departments. This shift toward leadership brought new challenges, including the need to balance personal academic ambitions with the institutional expectations placed on them as leaders. This switch to managerial or leadership roles, often meant that while they increased their institutional stock in one way, their ability to deliver research outputs decreased, which could be career limiting.

Senior Academics: Identity and Power Dynamics

Senior academics, those at the peak of their careers, reflected on how their professional development had evolved over time. Unlike early-career and mid-career academics, this group had a clearer sense of their academic identity and often described their professional development in terms of legacy and influence. Many had reduced the pressures of building an individual research portfolio, or generating a teaching reputation, and were now focused on shaping the future of their discipline, department or centre, while also still meeting production requirements led by REF and institutional goals. This shift in focus altered the way in which they interacted with the power dynamics of academia, as senior academics were often at the centre of these dynamics, both as agents of institutional power and as individuals still navigating the demands of external frameworks and institutional pressures. This idea that senior academics often find themselves in dual roles, as both leaders and participants within institutional power structures, can be particularly hard to navigate.

There was a strong emphasis on mentorship, with many participants expressing a desire to give back by supporting the professional growth of junior colleagues. However, one area that was lacking was mentorship or support for their own development. Senior colleagues are often seen as being at the pinnacle of their career, which means they are less likely to get the support or encouragement they need to pursue their own growth and aspirations. This is often the case when someone reaches the academic rank of Professor, but I would argue that development should be lifelong, continuous and fluid, ideas inherent in postmodern views of individuals in the workplace. It is important that an organisation supports and encourages staff at all levels and that learning, development and evolution is embedded into the way organisations function.

Negotiating Professional Development Across Career Stages

Across all career stages, it was clear that professional development is not a one-size-fits-all process. Each stage brings its own challenges and opportunities, shaped by the individual's identity, institutional context, and the power dynamics at play. The postmodern emphasis on fragmentation and fluidity is particularly relevant here, as professional development is constantly being reconstructed and reinterpreted based on the shifting realities of academic life.

In sum, the professional development needs of academic staff vary significantly depending on their experience level. Early-career academics are more focused on identity formation and navigating tensions, while mid-career academics grapple with institutional pressures and increasing leadership responsibilities. Senior academics, on the other hand, are more concerned with legacy and mentorship, even as they remain entangled in the power dynamics of institutional frameworks.

The Franz Model: Structure and Application in Academic Development

The use of the Franz (2009) Model of Engaged Scholarship provided a structured lens for examining professional development in academia, emphasising teaching, research, and engagement as core areas shaped by both internal and external influences. This structure allowed for a broad yet organised approach to structuring interview questions, as it provided loose boundaries for discussing academic roles and responsibilities. Through this model, participants' insights could be explored at an individual level but with a framework for understanding academic work. A postmodern perspective, though, reveals that this

approach has strengths and limitations, particularly its alignment with individual agency, identity, and the complex power dynamics within academia.

One of the model's key contributions is its ability to underscore adaptability within professional development, a factor especially resonant with the theme 'Adapting to Change: Flexibility and the Role of Time in Development.' The Franz Model emphasises engagement across multiple domains, highlighting the importance of evolving alongside institutional and societal needs. Yet, while the model supports this adaptability, it could be argued that it implicitly frames time as a structured, organisational metric rather than a fluid, subjective experience. In this way, the model overlooks the diverse time management strategies academics employ, potentially limiting flexibility in how time is perceived and used for self-directed development. Postmodernism, with its emphasis on individualised pathways, would critique this lack of fluidity, advocating instead for structures that recognise the varied temporal demands that influence professional growth.

Similarly, the Franz Model reinforces the theme of 'Empowered Growth: Personal Agency and Professional Identity,' allowing academics to define contributions across teaching, research, and engagement. This flexibility can enhance individual agency, supporting the development of academic identities that align with personal strengths. However, the model's structure may also reinforce institutional priorities over personal aspirations, subtly framing agency in terms of alignment with organisational needs. From a postmodern lens, which values subjective and context-specific growth, the Franz Model's emphasis on institutionally valued contributions may limit individual agency by suggesting that only certain types of contributions are valuable, potentially stifling the diversity of professional pathways. The easiest identification of this view is that at the heart of the model is the 'academia <-> community' (Franz, 2009) relationship, not the individual. This suggests that academia is the most important element, not the person.

The theme of 'Equity and Quality: Access to Professional Development Opportunities' is also reflected within the Franz Model, as it acknowledges internal and external influences that affect access to resources and opportunities. The model offers a viewpoint through which institutional inequities can be identified, yet it leans heavily on institutionally validated outcomes, which may narrow the scope of development pathways available to individuals. This focus potentially overlooks the breadth of contributions that might fall outside of institutional metrics, limiting recognition of diverse, individual trajectories that contribute to professional development. A postmodern critique would argue that true equity in

professional growth requires an expanded framework that accounts for unique, self-defined pathways, rather than reinforcing the power structures that may underrepresent individualised goals.

One of the Franz Model's most significant contributions is its acknowledgment of institutional power dynamics, which are especially salient in the theme 'Navigating Power and Tensions: Organisational Dynamics in Development.' The model highlights both internal and external pressures, such as those exerted by REF, TEF, and KEF, which shape academic identities and drive professional goals. Yet, in aligning professional development with institutional priorities, the model may inadvertently reinforce these power dynamics, positioning institutional metrics as central to professional growth. Postmodernism, with its emphasis on individual agency and deconstruction of power, would view this as a subtle form of institutional control, where development pathways become confined by expectations that serve organisational rather than individual interests. This inadvertently diminishes the autonomy of academics, positioning them more as agents fulfilling institutional roles than as individuals defining their own career trajectories.

Further, the Franz Model's separation of academic roles into distinct domains—teaching, research, and engagement—suggests a fixed view of professional identity that can restrict the fluidity inherent to academic roles. Postmodernism critiques this rigidity, viewing identity as an evolving interplay of roles that frequently overlap and inform one another. The experience of academics is often through their responsibilities being interconnected, blending research insights into teaching or using community engagement to enrich both research and instruction. By imposing fixed categories, the model may ignore the interwoven nature of the role. This failure to capture the multidimensional nature of academic identity goes against postmodernism when linked to professional growth.

Overall, while the Franz Model provides a valuable structure for analysing academic roles, its standardised framework can promote a uniform approach to professional development, potentially inhibiting the diversity of individual pathways. This emphasis on standardised categories may unintentionally encourage a one-size-fits-all view, diminishing the freedom to explore less conventional career trajectories. From a postmodern perspective, an individualised approach to professional growth would be more inclusive, supporting a range of career goals without confining academics to predefined paths. As a model to set boundaries for interviews, it has though been a particularly useful way of thinking about the role of a modern academic. However, by considering a broader spectrum of professional

identities and development trajectories, institutions could cultivate a richer, more inclusive academic environment, by moving away from more structured and traditional ways of thinking. Integrating a postmodern perspective into this framework could expand the model's applicability, encouraging a more inclusive approach to professional development that prioritises individual aspirations alongside institutional goals.

Postmodernism in Practice: Deconstructing Its Utility and Applicability in This Doctorate

Postmodernism, with its focus on critique, multiplicity, and the deconstruction of dominant narratives, has been invaluable in approaching the research in this doctorate. In many ways, it has served as both a philosophical foundation and a methodological approach, enabling a layered, critical analysis of professional development within academia. However, like any framework, it has presented limitations, particularly as postmodernism traditionally resists proposing prescriptive solutions. This section will explore how postmodernism has shaped, supported, and challenged the research in this study.

Deconstructing Postmodernism's Applicability

Postmodernism's emphasis on reflexivity, subjectivity, and the decentralisation of 'truth' aligns well with the relativist ontology guiding this study. By questioning essentialist notions of academic identity and professional development, postmodernism has opened space to consider academic staff's experiences as multifaceted, socially constructed, and dynamic. Through RTA, postmodernism has allowed for the co-construction of meaning, revealing the ways in which individual stories intersect with institutional power dynamics, external requirements, and internal motivations.

This reflexive stance has challenged traditional narratives that regard professional development as a linear, goal-oriented process. Instead, postmodernism has highlighted the fragmented, often contradictory experiences of academic staff as they plot their way through a landscape shaped by competing demands. It has encouraged an examination of the research focussing on the tensions between personal agency and institutional pressures, a theme closely related to Foucault's ideas on knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977, 1990; Foucault and Gordon, 1980), and to question the 'grand narratives' of academic success and productivity (Lyotard, 1979).

Applicability and Limitations: The Question of Practical Solutions

Despite these strengths, postmodernism's anti-foundationalist stance presents challenges when seeking actionable outcomes. By design, postmodernism does not aim to provide solutions or unified theories; its purpose is critique, not prescription. In the context of this research, this becomes particularly relevant in the transition to the next section, 'Evolving Professional Development.' Although postmodernism has allowed for a thorough examination of power dynamics, identity, and the constructed nature of professional development, it provides limited guidance on how to enhance this development constructively.

Moving Forward: From Critique to Constructive Application

While postmodernism has revealed the multiplicity and complexity of experiences within academia, the goal of 'Evolving Professional Development' implies moving beyond critique. To achieve this, it is necessary to transition from postmodernism's diagnostic strengths to a framework that accommodates constructive, individual-centred change. Postmodernism's insistence on dismantling traditional structures can be both enlightening and frustrating; it offers valuable insights into what does not work or is problematic but stops short of suggesting what could work better.

The 'Evolving Professional Development' section will therefore take an adaptive approach: informed by postmodern critique but not bound by its limitations. Here, there will be a focus on suggestions, rather than recommendations, that emphasise agency, context-sensitive growth, and the individual's power to shape their professional journey. This shift does not abandon postmodernist principles but uses them as a foundation for building a more participatory, flexible model of professional development. Practical suggestions will respect the multiple nature of academic identities and seek to empower staff within their unique contexts, rather than impose universal solutions.

Postmodernism has proven to be a double-edged sword in this doctorate. Its strengths lie in deconstructing existing assumptions, unmasking power structures, and illuminating the subjective, fragmented nature of professional development within academia. However, postmodernism's aversion to unified solutions limits its applicability in crafting actionable strategies. By moving from a purely postmodern critique to a practical, individual-centred

framework in ‘Evolving Professional Development,’ this study seeks to bridge this gap. The goal is to create space for ongoing development that honours postmodernist insights while addressing the real-world need for practical, transformative change in academic professional development.

Restructuring within the University: Navigating an Evolving Academic Landscape

Throughout the course of this research, the university underwent significant structural changes, reshaping not only its operational framework but also the roles, identities, and professional development experiences of academic staff. For instance, during the research, the University has had two different Vice Chancellors and two different strategies. The College was born, bringing together Aston Business School, School of Social Science and Humanities and Aston Law School. The relationship between those entities has evolved over time, and we have also had external factors, like REF, TEF and KEF, taking place over that period too. While the findings of this research are based on themes that transcended these changes, these organisational shifts underscore a key aspect of academic life: change is constant, and it is experienced at personal and institutional levels. By recognising the environment’s fluidity, it is possible to further contextualise the findings and offer a more nuanced interpretation of the professional development journeys of academic staff.

The findings of this study are not static, instead, they mirror the fluctuations and adaptability inherent in postmodern theory. The university’s shifting structure demonstrates the fluidity of the context and illustrates that professional identities and development are continually negotiated within evolving institutional boundaries. This context reinforces the argument that academic roles are not fixed. They are instead characterised by a continuous interaction between institutional expectations and individual agency. In postmodern terms, these shifts highlight the ways in which power dynamics, identities, and the meaning of professional growth are redefined and challenged by each change within the institution.

Linking the Themes to Institutional Restructuring and Flexibility

The university’s structural evolution links to several core themes identified in the research. *Empowered Growth: Personal Agency and Professional Identity,* for instance, is a theme that aligns closely with the postmodern rejection of a fixed academic identity. In response to

restructuring, academic staff would re-evaluate their roles in the organisation, often adapting to meet new expectations and demands across a variety of areas. The need to redefine themselves amidst change reflects the instability of professional identity, linking back to the postmodernism rejection of rigid or singularly focussed roles. The experiences and individual stories explored within the research illustrate how changes to institutional priorities can motivate individuals to mutate and evolve. There is a need to reconcile personal aspirations with fluctuating, and sometimes contradictory, professional obligations.

The *Navigating Power and Tensions: Organising dynamics in Development* theme similarly connects with restructuring as institutional changes increase tension between the agency of the individual and the structure that surrounds them. Frameworks like REF, TEF, and KEF, particularly the former, are a source of frustration as these metric based processes shape career progression and professional development in ways that are not always fair or appropriate. During times of structural change, these frameworks take on a heightened role, framing professional value in institutional terms and adding another layer of pressure on staff to align with evolving organisational goals. Through a postmodern critique, we can uncover how these frameworks not only dictate professional success but also act as mechanisms of institutional control, shaping and sometimes constraining the agency of academic staff.

Restructuring puts further emphasis on the role of agency and autonomy in professional development. The ability to assert control over one's own development is inherently shaped by institutional frameworks, but organisational change complicates this further. As academic staff adjust to new systems, workloads, and expectations, their autonomy is often re-negotiated in response to shifting administrative boundaries. From a postmodern perspective, this reveals the constructed and often fragile nature of agency within a university setting. The university's restructuring underscores how fluidity and adaptability are essential for staff to maintain their sense of professional growth and agency, even as institutional forces continually reshape the academic landscape.

By acknowledging the structural evolution of the university, this study reflects a postmodern approach that values flexibility, adaptability, and the multiple ways academic experiences manifest. The changing nature of the university reinforces the notion that roles and identities are not fixed; rather, they are continually shaped by evolving institutional priorities, power dynamics, and external expectations. This understanding contributes to the overarching argument that professional development is not a linear process but a fluid, multifaceted journey shaped by personal agency, institutional structures, and an ever-changing academic

environment. The findings and framework applied in this study emphasise the need for a more adaptable, inclusive approach to professional development, one that values diversity in academic journeys and recognises the subjective realities of those navigating the complexities of an academic career.

Limitations of the Study

Every research project has limitations, and this study is no exception. The choices made regarding ontology, epistemology, research design, theoretical frameworks, analytical techniques, and sample size all shape the scope and interpretation of the findings. Additionally, as a researcher, my background, positionality, and experience have influenced the data collection and analysis process. This section critically examines these limitations, offering a transparent view of their potential impact on the study's findings and conclusions.

Relativist Ontology

The choice of relativism as an ontological stance was foundational to the study, aligning with the study's aim to explore individual perspectives within academic professional development. However, a relativist perspective inherently limits the generalisability of findings. This approach prioritises the subjective realities of participants, suggesting that no singular truth or fixed reality exists. While this focus on multiple truths enriches understanding, it constrains the capacity to draw overarching conclusions or apply findings to broader populations. Researchers or stakeholders who prioritise universal or objective truths may find this limitation challenging when seeking actionable or broadly applicable results. It has been challenging, yet rewarding, for me to move away from more traditional research views and to align myself with an approach that feels more natural to my values and view of the world.

Interpretivist Epistemology and Postmodern Lens

Adopting an interpretivist epistemology, combined with a postmodern lens, allows for the exploration of power dynamics, agency, and the complexity of individual identities. However, interpretivism's emphasis on subjective interpretation creates inherent ambiguity in findings. In striving to respect participants' diverse perspectives, it can act as a force against the identification of clear-cut patterns or definitive themes, which some may view as a drawback, especially in contexts where actionable insights are desired. The postmodern approach,

although ideal for critical analysis and deconstruction, may inadvertently obscure the focus on practical recommendations, as it leans heavily toward critique rather than solution-building. However, there are some ways it is possible to straddle the approach taken here and generate ideas around the evolution of professional development (see Chapter: Evolving Professional Development)

Qualitative Design with Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The choice of a qualitative design using RTA offers depth and contextual richness but also comes with inherent limitations. Qualitative research is often criticised for its lack of objectivity, and in this case, RTA's inherently subjective approach to data interpretation could be perceived as increasing the risk of bias. Unlike more standardised methods, RTA's fluid and interpretive nature makes it difficult to establish consistency or replicability in a traditional sense. However, the power of RTA comes from the inherent bias in my interpretation, particularly in this case where I am an active participant in the organisation who has direct experience to call upon, and that I can be reflexive and mindful about the influence I have on the process and the interpretation. Through my interpretations and reflections, I could overemphasise themes or patterns that resonated with me personally, possibly at the expense of other relevant insights. However, by engaging in this process intentionally and mindfully, I am much less likely to do such things without noticing and taking appropriate action.

Limitations of the Franz Model as a Framework

The Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship has been discussed above in depth. However, it is useful to point out that the model proved a useful framework for organising key topics, though it may have inadvertently constrained participants' responses within these predefined categories. The model's emphasis on academia's broader structures, such as teaching and research responsibilities, might overshadow individual-level concerns or restrict focus to institutional perspectives. In this way, the model potentially limits a more expansive and refined understanding of participants' personal experiences and aspirations. Though the combination with using the model with the research design, analytical approach and postmodern critique should limit the chance of this occurring within the study.

Postmodernism as a Dominant Theoretical Lens

While postmodernism provided an excellent foundation for examining complexity, identity, and power, it inherently resists practical outcomes and solutions. Its deconstructive nature makes it challenging to apply postmodern insights to prescriptive recommendations, particularly within a professional development context that seeks constructive change. Additionally, postmodernism's critique of 'grand narratives' could risk undermining more unified theories or interpretations that could serve to unify participants' experiences across diverse contexts. By focusing on fragmentation and multiplicity, this approach limits the study's ability to advocate for broader structural changes.

Challenges with Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA was well-suited to the study's objectives, enabling an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. However, RTA's interpretive flexibility introduces risks of inconsistency and interpretive drift. Without structured coding or validation techniques, RTA relies heavily on the researcher's capacity to engage reflexively with the data, a skill that requires extensive experience to apply rigorously. As a relatively new researcher, my reflexive skills are still developing, and there may be instances where my interpretations were overly influenced by my background or biases. Additionally, while RTA allows for fluidity, it lacks the rigid criteria seen in other analytical methods, which may introduce further subjectivity into the findings.

Sample Size of 19 Academic Staff

Although qualitative research does not seek statistical representativeness, the relatively small sample size of 19 could be challenged. This sample, while rich in insights, may not capture the full diversity of experiences within the broader academic community, particularly when considering factors such as institutional differences, career stages, and personal backgrounds. Some critical perspectives or variations may have been missed, meaning the study may only provide a partial view of professional development experiences in academia. Moreover, self-selection bias might influence which participants chose to engage with the study, potentially skewing the findings toward those more willing to discuss their experiences openly.

Researcher Background and Potential Bias

My background in psychology, human resource management and counselling, and my position as a staff member in the same institution as participants introduces both strengths and limitations. While my familiarity with the institutional culture provided contextual insights, it will have also influenced my interpretations. Familiarity can lead to assumptions, possibly overlooking subtleties or downplaying insights that challenge my preconceived notions. Although I engaged in reflexivity to mitigate these risks, there remains the potential for bias due to my embeddedness within the institution. Additionally, the power dynamics inherent in interviewing peers within my own institution may have influenced how openly participants shared certain aspects of their experiences.

Reflexivity and Researcher Experience

Reflexivity is central to both interpretivist research and postmodernist critique, and while I worked hard during my research to maintain a reflexive approach, my limited experience as a researcher may have affected my capacity to apply this rigorously. Reflexive analysis is a skill that deepens over time, and as a relatively novice researcher, my reflexive abilities are still maturing. The subjective and evolving nature of reflexivity also risks shifting interpretations as the researcher's understanding of the data changes over time, potentially affecting consistency. The constant balancing act between researcher engagement and detachment is a challenging skill, and while I strove for rigorous reflexivity, I acknowledge that it may have influenced the final interpretations.

In summary, this study's limitations reflect both the strengths and constraints of a relativist, postmodernist approach to academic professional development. While these limitations highlight areas where findings may lack generalisability or consistency, they also underscore the depth and richness that qualitative, reflexive methods can bring. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the study's findings, especially in contexts that prioritise objectivity or generalisability. Future research might build on these limitations by expanding sample sizes, introducing mixed methods for greater rigour, or adopting more structured analytical techniques to balance the subjectivity inherent in reflexive analysis. By acknowledging these limitations transparently, this discussion enhances the study's credibility, setting a foundation for continued exploration within a more robust and critical framework.

Chapter Summary

This chapter critically examined the study's findings on academic professional development through a postmodern lens, emphasising the fluid and complex nature of identity, power, and agency in HE. The research questions were revisited with a relativist approach, reframing them as evolving guides shaped by context and individual experience rather than fixed queries.

Key themes, including The Influence of Time, Provision of Professional Development, and the impact of Covid, illustrated how institutional expectations and workload demands often limited staff agency, with research output privileged over teaching and mentorship. COVID further intensified these dynamics, revealing reduced informal support networks and underscoring power imbalances as staff faced heightened pressures with limited institutional backing.

The chapter also critiqued frameworks like REF, TEF, and KEF, showing how these structures shaped professional identity and restricted individual development. These frameworks often created a disconnect between institutional goals and individual aspirations, reinforcing a power hierarchy that constrained diverse professional identities. Some participants engaged in acts of subtle resistance, underscoring the need for more adaptive, person-centred development opportunities.

The Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship was used as a framework in this study to contextualise the interpreted themes across academic roles relating to teaching, research, and engagement. While the model provided structure, its focus on institutional outcomes, limited flexibility and recognition of individual agency, aligns development with institutional metrics rather than personal growth.

Overall, the chapter demonstrated the complexities of academic professional development, highlighting the need for adaptable, supportive approaches that balance institutional goals with individual aspirations. These insights provide a foundation for the subsequent chapter, which offers suggestions to evolve professional development practices in academia.

6. Evolving Professional Development

Chapter Overview

Traditionally, research theses, particularly for a Doctorate in Business Administration, would include a section titled 'Recommendations.' However, given the design and values of this research, which adopts postmodernism to critique professional development, this chapter is titled *Evolving Professional Development*. This title reflects a shift from top-down directives to a framework that prioritises empowerment, individual agency, and co-constructed developmental pathways. The ideas presented aim to inspire staff development by focusing on individual contexts, aspirations, and needs, rather than offering a blueprint for organisational change. Instead of prescribing solutions for management, these ideas empower individuals to take charge of their own learning and support the development of others. The chapter outlines 18 distinct ideas, each accompanied by an overview of its significance and practical steps for implementation, fostering a more adaptable, inclusive, and responsive approach to professional growth. These are:

- Decentralised approaches to professional development
- Creating spaces for reflexivity and resistance
- Emphasising fluidity and ongoing evolution
- Mentorship as a two-way process
- Flexible metrics of success
- Empowerment through storytelling
- Valuing emotional labour and care work
- Challenging the commodification of knowledge
- Intersectionality in professional development
- Encouraging collaborative and collective professional development
- Embracing uncertainty and ambiguity in career pathways
- Rethinking work-life balance through a postmodern lens
- Building relational networks and social support
- Acknowledging the role of time in development
- Challenging fixed power dynamics in professional development
- Creating equitable access to professional development opportunities
- Navigating power and tensions in organisational dynamics
- Empowering growth through personal agency and identity

Decentralised Approaches to Professional Development

In line with postmodern thinking, professional development in academia should be seen as an inherently personal and contextual process. A decentralised approach to professional development allows academics to take control of their own growth, moving away from institutional frameworks like REF, TEF, and KEF, which often dictate a rigid, one-size-fits-all standard for success. Instead of aligning academic development with institutional metrics that prioritise measurable outcomes, such as research outputs or student feedback scores, a decentralised model would empower individuals to set their own development goals based on personal interests, aspirations, and contextual realities.

This shifts the emphasis from external benchmarks to self-determined growth, allowing academics to pursue projects and skills that resonate with their unique professional identities. In practice, this could mean encouraging academics to engage in personalised development plans, where they set goals in areas such as interdisciplinary collaboration, teaching innovation, or public engagement—areas that may not always align with institutional priorities but hold personal significance and lead to broader contributions to society and the academic community. Ultimately, this approach would empower academics by allowing them to co-construct their own developmental trajectories, rather than simply responding to externally imposed demands.

In the current set up at the University, there has been various changes to our performance management systems and how we allow for developmental opportunities. However, conflating the achievement of metric-based objectives with the development goals and aspirations of the individual does not provide the focus on development as it should be. Too often there is more focus on the objectives and targets rather than truly supporting, encouraging and developing growth-based activities that allow for the person to make the most of their strengths and have a real sense of autonomy in their development. Growth, in professional development terms, needs to be considered separately to any form of performance management or review process. This is not just about separating when you discuss these two areas, this is about decoupling as much of the relationship as possible. The manager's role in such discussions will be to listen, coach, reflect and guide the staff member through the development process while always remembering it is the individual who has the agency to craft and direct their development needs.

Possible practical steps:

- Encourage individual development plans (IDPs): Promote the use of IDPs where staff set their own development goals, aligning them with both personal aspirations and institutional needs as the individual deems necessary. Staff should be encouraged to take control of their development, providing a clear pathway for growth, and should they choose to align needs with the institution it is based on intention not compulsion.

- Offer identity exploration workshops: Provide workshops or coaching sessions that encourage staff to reflect on their professional identity, exploring how their past experiences, values, and goals influence their academic roles. This helps individuals craft a developmental journey that resonates with their sense of self.

- Create personalised mentoring opportunities: Offer personalised mentoring where staff can connect with senior colleagues who share similar career trajectories or values or provide staff with the skills to identify and enlist mentors outside of the institution to help them explore their evolving identity with support.

Creating Spaces for Reflexivity and Resistance

Professional development should not only be about skill acquisition or career progression, it should also provide opportunities for critical reflection. Creating formal spaces where academics can regularly engage in reflexive practices is crucial for addressing the power dynamics embedded within institutional frameworks. These spaces would allow academics to critically engage with the institutional structures that shape their professional development, challenging the dominant discourses that frame academic success in narrow, often quantitative, terms. Reflexivity, in this context, means more than personal introspection, it involves a critical examination of the relationships between power, identity, and professional growth. By providing academics with designated times and settings to reflect on how their development is shaped by institutional pressures, as well as how they might resist or navigate these pressures, institutions can foster a culture of resistance that empowers individuals to question the status quo. This aligns with postmodernism's critique of grand narratives and invites academics to construct alternative narratives that encourage personal agency, rather than institutional conformity. In doing so, these reflexive spaces become zones of empowerment, where academics are encouraged to challenge the assumptions underlying their professional development and advocate for change in how development is conceptualised and supported.

Practical Steps:

- Establish Reflective Practice Workshops: Offer structured workshops that encourage academics to reflect on their roles, values, and experiences, fostering critical thinking about institutional expectations.

- Develop Collaborative Reflective Journals: Create an online space where staff can anonymously reflect on their experiences with institutional pressures, with entries viewable by peers.

- Encourage Reflexive Development Circles: Form small discussion groups where academics can openly discuss their development challenges, share strategies, and support each other in navigating institutional norms.

Emphasising Fluidity and Ongoing Evolution

Postmodernism rejects fixed, linear notions of identity and progress, and this perspective can be applied to professional development as well. Development should be seen as a fluid, evolving process, rather than a path with a clear endpoint. This perspective aligns with the lived realities of academics, whose roles and responsibilities are constantly shifting due to changes in institutional priorities, disciplinary trends, and personal aspirations. Encouraging academics to view their professional development as non-linear opens up possibilities for them to redefine success and growth at different points in their careers. For instance, an early-career academic might prioritise research in their initial years, but later shift towards mentoring or leadership as their career progresses. Institutions can support this fluidity by providing regular opportunities for academics to revisit and revise their professional development plans, ensuring that these plans remain responsive to changing personal and professional contexts. Such an approach fosters resilience and adaptability, empowering academics to evolve their professional identities in ways that align with their personal values and life circumstances, rather than being constrained by rigid institutional expectations.

Practical Steps:

- Create Career Mobility Options: Implement policies for role rotation, short-term secondments, or interdisciplinary exchanges to support evolving interests and keep development dynamic.

- Support Identity Exploration at Different Stages: Offer tailored workshops and mentorship for early, mid, and senior-career academics to revisit and redefine their goals and identities.

- Develop Flexible Professional Development Plans: Encourage staff to periodically reassess and adjust their development plans, making it easier to adapt to new areas of interest or responsibilities.

Mentorship as a Two-Way Process

Mentorship is traditionally viewed as a hierarchical relationship, where senior academics pass on their wisdom and expertise to junior colleagues. However, in a postmodern framework, mentorship should be reframed as a two-way, reciprocal process, where both parties can learn and grow from the exchange. This approach recognises that junior academics bring valuable new perspectives, particularly in areas such as digital innovation, interdisciplinary research, or emerging pedagogies, which can enrich the experiences of senior colleagues. By fostering mentorship relationships that are collaborative rather than hierarchical, institutions can create a more dynamic professional development culture, one that encourages knowledge to flow in multiple directions. This reciprocal approach to mentorship also challenges traditional power structures, aligning with postmodern critiques of authority and hierarchy. It allows both junior and senior academics to co-construct knowledge, share insights, and support each other's growth in meaningful ways. Moreover, such mentorship relationships can lead to mutual empowerment, as both parties engage in ongoing dialogue about their experiences, challenges, and professional goals, ensuring that professional development is driven by collaboration rather than top-down directives.

Practical Steps:

- Establish Reciprocal Mentorship Programs: Create mentorship pairings that encourage a mutual exchange of skills, recognising that both junior and senior academics can contribute meaningfully to each other's growth.

- Foster Cross-Disciplinary Mentorship Networks: Facilitate mentorship across departments, allowing for diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary support.

- Host Co-Learning Workshops: Offer sessions where mentors and mentees jointly explore new areas, such as digital tools or emerging research methods, promoting collaborative learning and shared

Flexible Metrics of Success

Institutional metrics like REF and TEF often prioritise quantitative measures of success, such as publication counts, citation metrics, or student satisfaction scores. However, these narrow metrics fail to capture the intricacies of professional development, which often include intangible qualities such as innovation, creativity, or community impact. A postmodern approach to professional development would advocate for more flexible and holistic metrics of success, which recognise the diverse contributions that academics make to their disciplines, institutions, and society. Instead of focusing solely on outputs that can be easily measured, institutions should also value qualitative aspects of professional growth, such as the development of new teaching methodologies, contributions to interdisciplinary research, or mentorship of junior colleagues. By broadening the scope of what is recognised as successful professional development, institutions can create a more inclusive environment that values the varied ways in which academics contribute to knowledge production and dissemination. This shift would also reduce the pressure on academics to conform to narrow metrics, allowing them to pursue development opportunities that are personally meaningful and aligned with their unique skills and aspirations.

Practical Steps:

- Pilot Alternative Appraisal Systems: Experiment with appraisal methods that include qualitative reflections, peer reviews, or impact stories rather than only focusing on output metrics.

- Conduct Holistic Development Evaluations: Implement evaluations that assess contributions to teaching, mentoring, community impact, and interdisciplinary collaboration alongside research outputs and teaching feedback scores.

- Recognise Non-Traditional Metrics of Success: Celebrate contributions that are less quantifiable, such as innovative teaching methods or collaborative initiatives, in performance reviews and promotion criteria.

Empowerment Through Storytelling

In a postmodern framework, personal stories and narratives are powerful tools for deconstructing dominant discourses and asserting individual agency. Encouraging academics to share their professional development stories can serve as a form of empowerment, allowing them to articulate their struggles, successes, and aspirations in ways that challenge institutional narratives of success. Storytelling also creates opportunities for collective reflection, as academics share their experiences with each other, they can identify common challenges and strategies for overcoming institutional barriers. By framing professional development as a narrative process, where academics have the opportunity to tell and retell their stories, institutions can foster a culture of shared learning and mutual support. This approach aligns with postmodernism's emphasis on plurality and fragmentation, recognising that there is no single 'right' way to pursue professional development. Instead, each individual story adds a unique perspective to the broader conversation, creating a richer and more diverse understanding of what it means to grow and succeed in academia.

Practical Steps:

- Create a Storytelling Mentorship Program: Facilitate story-sharing sessions where new and senior academics exchange narratives about their career journeys, offering diverse perspectives on growth.

- Develop a Reflective Journal Platform: Introduce a shared platform where staff can document and share reflections on their career experiences, available for others to learn from.

- Host Storytelling Workshops: Organise workshops where academics can openly discuss and reflect on their professional stories, promoting connection and mutual support across the institution.

Valuing Emotional Labour and Care Work

Another often overlooked aspect of professional development is the emotional labour that many academics, particularly women and minority groups, are expected to perform. This includes pastoral care for students, mentoring colleagues, and navigating institutional politics, all of which are critical to the functioning of academic life but are rarely recognised or rewarded in formal performance metrics. Postmodernism's emphasis on deconstructing power structures and challenging norms can help bring attention to this often invisible form of labour. Institutions should evolve their understanding of professional development to include the emotional and relational dimensions of academic work, recognising that these are essential for building inclusive and supportive learning environments. This means creating formal structures that value and reward the work of academics who contribute to the well-being of their colleagues and students, as well as fostering emotional resilience as part of professional development. By acknowledging the emotional aspects of academic life, institutions can move towards a more holistic understanding of what it means to develop professionally, especially for those whose contributions go beyond traditional research and teaching outputs.

Practical Steps:

- Develop Recognition Systems for Emotional Labour: Include emotional support and mentorship in staff appraisals and promotion criteria to formally acknowledge these contributions.

- Introduce Peer Support Circles: Create dedicated spaces where academics can share and receive emotional support, building a supportive network around the challenges of pastoral care.

- Provide Emotional Intelligence Training: Offer workshops focused on emotional intelligence and resilience, helping staff build skills to manage their well-being and support others.

Challenging the Commodification of Knowledge

One of the critiques that postmodernism makes about contemporary academia is the commodification of knowledge, where research is increasingly driven by metrics, rankings, and market-driven agendas. Professional development in this context is often framed around enhancing one's marketability, whether by increasing research outputs, improving grant acquisition, or bolstering institutional prestige. A postmodern rethinking of professional development would challenge this commodification, encouraging academics to pursue knowledge for its intrinsic value and its capacity to inspire social change. In this view, professional development would not be about accumulating achievements or building a portfolio that enhances one's 'value' in the academic market but rather about fostering intellectual curiosity and critical engagement with the world. This could take the form of encouraging academics to pursue non-traditional research agendas, engage in creative scholarship, or build partnerships with communities outside the academic sphere. In this way, the focus shifts from career advancement to meaningful engagement with knowledge and society, encouraging academics to think about their work in ways that are transformative rather than transactional.

Practical Steps:

- Launch an Initiative for Impactful Knowledge Sharing: Encourage non-traditional research dissemination, such as public lectures, community events, or digital storytelling, to expand research impact beyond academic journals.

- Establish Social Impact Funds: Create funding streams dedicated to community-based research projects that aim to foster social change and community engagement.

- Promote Knowledge Dissemination Beyond Academia: Incentivise academics to share findings in public forums, including podcasts, blogs, and collaborative partnerships with external organisations.

Intersectionality in Professional Development

Intersectionality, the idea that various forms of identity (gender, race, class, etc.) intersect and create unique experiences of oppression or privilege, offers another lens through which professional development can be reimagined. A postmodern framework would highlight the intersectional nature of professional development, recognising that different academics face different barriers and opportunities depending on their identity and social position. For example, female academics of colour may face unique challenges in accessing mentorship or navigating institutional expectations, compared to their white male colleagues. A professional development model informed by intersectionality would seek to address these systemic inequalities by offering tailored support and recognising the diverse ways in which identity shapes professional experiences. This could involve creating affinity groups, peer mentoring programs, or development workshops that explicitly consider how race, gender, and class influence one's academic journey. By acknowledging these complexities, institutions can foster a more equitable approach to professional development, ensuring that all academics, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to thrive.

Practical Steps:

- Offer Tailored Development Programs: Design workshops that address the unique challenges faced by different identity groups, providing support specific to their experiences.

- Create Safe Spaces for Underrepresented Groups: Establish affinity groups where marginalised academics can connect, share resources, and receive support tailored to their experiences.

- Ensure Equitable Access to Development Opportunities: Regularly monitor participation in development programs to identify gaps, adjusting resources to improve access for underrepresented groups.

Encouraging Collaborative and Collective Professional Development

Traditional models of professional development often focus on individual achievement, with success framed in terms of personal milestones like securing grants or publishing papers. However, postmodernism emphasises collaboration and collective meaning-making over individualism. A postmodern approach to professional development could encourage academics to pursue collaborative projects that not only enhance their own growth but also contribute to the development of their peers and the broader academic community. This might include forming interdisciplinary research groups, engaging in community-based participatory research, or co-developing teaching materials with colleagues. By shifting the focus from individual advancement to collective empowerment, professional development becomes a shared process that fosters mutual learning and support. This aligns with postmodernism's critique of hierarchical, individualistic structures and instead promotes a more egalitarian, collaborative model of academic life.

Practical Steps:

- Facilitate Interdisciplinary Teams: Establish programs that encourage cross-departmental collaborations on research, teaching, or community engagement projects, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue.

- Create Collaborative Professional Development Goals: Incorporate team-based goals into appraisals, emphasising collective achievement as part of professional growth.

- Support Peer-Mentoring Schemes: Develop mentorship programs that enable colleagues to mentor each other across career stages and disciplines, promoting collective development.

Embracing Uncertainty and Ambiguity in Career Pathways

A postmodern approach to professional development would also encourage academics to embrace the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in career progression, rather than viewing it as a linear journey towards a fixed goal. Traditional career pathways in academia often prioritise tenure-track positions or senior leadership roles, creating a narrow view of what constitutes success. However, this rigid framework fails to account for the multiple realities and trajectories that academics may pursue, particularly in an era where careers are increasingly non-linear and diverse. Postmodernism invites academics to see their careers as fluid, with opportunities to shift between teaching, research, leadership, and even roles outside the academy. Professional development should, therefore, equip academics with the skills and mindset to navigate uncertainty, encouraging them to embrace serendipity and diverse opportunities rather than adhering to a pre-defined path. This means creating development programs that are flexible and adaptive, recognising that careers are no longer confined to traditional academic roles, but may include entrepreneurship, public engagement, or cross-sector collaborations.

Practical Steps:

- Encourage Non-Linear Career Development Workshops: Offer workshops where academics can explore diverse career pathways, including transitions between academia, industry, and public engagement.

- Offer Career Flexibility Coaching: Provide coaching that helps academics navigate non-linear career paths, recognising transferable skills and exploring alternative opportunities.

- Develop Flexible Leadership roles: Establish part-time or rotating leadership roles to allow academics to explore leadership without a permanent commitment. This supports flexible career development, letting individuals engage in leadership experiences alongside other academic priorities.

Rethinking Work-Life Balance Through a Postmodern Lens

Work-life balance is a frequent concern in academia, where the demands of research, teaching, and administrative duties often extend beyond normal working hours. However, work-life balance is typically framed in binary terms, as a division between ‘work’ and ‘life’ that must be carefully managed. A postmodern perspective would challenge this binary approach, recognising that academic life and personal life are often interwoven, with professional and personal identities overlapping in complex ways. Rather than seeking a rigid separation between the two, professional development programs could instead encourage academics to think about integration, finding ways to harmonise personal and professional goals in a way that supports well-being and fulfilment. This could involve offering flexible working arrangements, mental health support, or career coaching that helps academics align their personal values with their professional development. By moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to work-life balance, institutions can foster a more nuanced and supportive environment where academics feel empowered to thrive in both their personal and professional lives.

Practical Steps:

- Create Personalised Work-Life Integration Plans: Provide tailored coaching to help academics develop integration plans that align their personal values with professional responsibilities.

- Offer Flexible Working Arrangements: Encourage options such as flexible hours, job sharing, or remote work, supporting academics in blending personal and professional responsibilities.

- Prioritise Well-Being Initiatives: Create a culture that emphasises mental and physical health by offering well-being workshops, stress management training, and regular check-ins on personal and professional fulfilment.

Building Relational Networks and Social Support

Professional development is not an isolated endeavour but a deeply relational process. The connections individuals make within their professional and social environments often have a profound influence on their career trajectories and overall growth. Strong relational networks foster not only the exchange of knowledge but also the emotional and psychological support essential for navigating the complexities of academic life. In a postmodern framework, these networks are valued for their organic, evolving nature, rejecting rigid, hierarchical models of interaction in favour of fluid, dynamic relationships that empower individuals to co-create meaning and opportunity.

By prioritising the cultivation of networking opportunities and support structures, institutions can create a more inclusive and collaborative professional landscape. This includes facilitating both formal and informal interactions that enable academics to share resources, ideas, and encouragement. Relational networks also act as conduits for innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration, allowing individuals to draw upon diverse perspectives and expertise. When supported effectively, these connections become a foundation not only for individual growth but for fostering a sense of community and shared purpose within the broader academic environment.

Practical Steps:

- Develop Mentoring Circles: Set up mentoring groups where small groups of academics connect regularly to share insights, support, and advice, promoting a sense of community.

- Host Purpose-Driven Networking Events: Organise networking events focused on specific career topics, fostering connections that provide both social and professional support.

- Create Cross-Departmental Collaboration Spaces: Establish forums or casual spaces where academics from different departments can engage in discussions, broadening their professional networks and enhancing interdisciplinary support.

Acknowledging the Role of Time in Development

Time is one of the most valuable yet constrained resources in academia, where competing demands often leave little room for professional development. Beyond traditional time management, Henri Bergson's concept of duration offers a fresh perspective, framing time as subjective and fluid rather than rigidly measurable. From this view, professional development becomes a continuous process, shaped by the interplay of past experiences, current roles, and future aspirations. Institutions can adopt this approach by supporting academics in understanding time as an enabler of growth rather than a limitation. Offering reflective opportunities, addressing time-related anxieties, and fostering creativity within the flow of academic life can help shift development from a scheduled task to an integral, enriching element of professional identity.

Practical Steps:

- Build in Structured Time for Professional Development: Allocate professional development time within workload models, ensuring it includes opportunities for reflective practices. Encourage academics to explore how their past experiences, present goals, and future aspirations interconnect, allowing time for reflection on how their work contributes to their personal and professional evolution.

- Provide Time-Understanding Training: Develop workshops or training sessions that help academics reframe their relationship with time, based on Bergson's concept of *duration*. These sessions would focus on understanding the subjective experience of time, managing time anxiety, and embracing non-linear professional growth paths. Participants would be encouraged to view time as an enabler of creativity and reflection rather than a strict constraint.

- Establish Flexible Deadlines for Developmental Work: Implement policies that allow for flexible deadlines, but also embed reflective practices within project timelines. Encourage academics to view developmental projects as part of an ongoing journey rather than isolated tasks, enabling them to integrate creativity and personal growth into their work.

Challenging Fixed Power Dynamics in Professional Development

Traditional professional development often relies on hierarchical frameworks, where leadership dictates growth opportunities with minimal staff input. This top-down approach can reduce engagement and limit the relevance of initiatives by failing to address diverse needs. A postmodern perspective challenges these power dynamics, advocating for a more inclusive process that values collaboration, shared ownership, and diverse perspectives.

By decentralising control, institutions can foster environments where academics actively participate in shaping development opportunities that align with their aspirations and contexts. This inclusive approach enhances engagement and encourages innovative, flexible methods for growth. Breaking down these hierarchies shifts professional development from a rigid, prescriptive model to a dynamic, collaborative process.

Encouraging co-creation of programs not only makes professional development more relevant but also aligns with postmodern ideals of decentralisation and diversity. By empowering individuals and valuing shared responsibility, institutions can transform development into a collaborative and meaningful experience.

Practical Steps:

- Create a Participatory Development Process: Involve academics at all levels in designing professional development programs by gathering input through surveys, focus groups, and open forums.

- Establish Peer-Led Development Initiatives: Encourage staff to lead their own training sessions, workshops, or discussion groups, empowering them to share expertise and take ownership of their growth.

- Implement Rotating Leadership Roles in Development Planning: Allow various staff members to participate in planning and organising development programs, ensuring diverse perspectives and reducing top-down decision-making.

Creating Equitable Access to Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development must be inclusive and accessible, ensuring all academics, regardless of background or resources, have equal opportunities for growth. Systemic barriers, such as those faced by early-career academics, teaching-focused staff, or underrepresented groups, often hinder advancement. A commitment to equity goes beyond surface-level equality, requiring institutions to actively identify and address these challenges to foster a fairer and more supportive environment.

A postmodern perspective advocates for strategies that consider diverse needs and individual contexts, challenging one-size-fits-all approaches. Transparent processes, targeted support for marginalised groups, and continuous monitoring of participation are essential to ensuring fair access. By embedding equity into professional development, institutions create a culture where growth is inclusive and attainable for all.

Practical Steps:

- Develop Transparent Selection Processes for Development Opportunities: Ensure that development programs have clear, fair, and accessible criteria for participation, moving away from informal or exclusive selection methods.

- Provide Targeted Support for Underrepresented Groups: Offer specific grants, workshops, or mentorships designed to support early-career staff, women, and academics from marginalised backgrounds.

- Regularly Monitor and Adjust Access to Development Programs: Track participation data to identify gaps in access, using this data to make adjustments and ensure more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities across demographics.

Navigating Power and Tensions in Organisational Dynamics

Academics often face power imbalances when accessing development opportunities or seeking recognition. These tensions, shaped by institutional priorities and individual agency, can limit equitable access and create barriers to growth. A postmodern approach encourages transparency and fairness, focusing on dismantling hierarchies and supporting staff in navigating organisational pressures.

Creating open feedback channels, fostering awareness of institutional power dynamics, and introducing shared leadership roles can help level the playing field. These strategies enable staff to feel empowered and supported in achieving their goals, fostering a more inclusive and collaborative professional development culture.

Practical Steps:

- Develop Open Channels for Anonymous Feedback: Allow staff to voice concerns about professional development policies, organisational power structures, and barriers to access without fear of repercussions.

- Host Awareness Workshops on Power Dynamics: Offer sessions on understanding and managing institutional power dynamics, teaching skills in negotiation, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution.

- Introduce Rotating Leadership Positions in Development Planning: Enable different staff members to take on temporary roles in leading development initiatives, providing opportunities for new perspectives and disrupting entrenched hierarchies.

Empowering Growth Through Personal Agency and Identity

Professional development should not only enhance skills but also empower individuals to shape their own career paths. Recognising academic identity as fluid allows for adaptable growth that aligns with shifting roles and goals. This approach emphasises personal agency, encouraging academics to take ownership of their development journey.

By fostering autonomy through personalised development plans, identity-focused workshops, and tailored mentorship programs, institutions can support academics in aligning their growth with their unique values and aspirations. This not only empowers individuals but also strengthens their ability to navigate and thrive in dynamic professional landscapes.

Practical Steps:

- Promote Individual Development Plans (IDPs): Encourage the use of IDPs where academics set personal development goals aligned with their unique aspirations and needs, allowing for genuine autonomy.

- Offer Identity Exploration Workshops: Host workshops that encourage academics to reflect on their evolving identities, drawing connections between past experiences, current roles, and future aspirations.

- Provide Tailored Mentorship Opportunities: Develop mentorship programs that match academics with mentors who share similar values, allowing them to navigate professional growth in ways that align with their individual identity and purpose.

Overview of Suggestions

While this research deliberately avoids prescribing rigid methods for action in the workplace, the table provided offers a structured way to conceptualise potential initiatives. By categorising practical steps based on cost, success timescales, and the link to a primary theme, it becomes easier to communicate and align these ideas with personal and institutional goals, as well as link the evolution of professional development to this research. This table serves as a tool for reflection, helping individuals and the organisation to understand what is being proposed, and to assess how best to adapt these ideas within specific contexts. In this way, the table acts as a guide rather than a blueprint, offering flexibility while enhancing clarity and accessibility.

Figure 5: Practical steps with theme, estimated cost and success timescale

Practical Step	Primary Theme	Cost	Success Timescale
Create Career Mobility Options	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Develop Flexible Professional Development Plans	Adapting to Change	Low	Medium
Launch an Initiative for Impactful Knowledge Sharing	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Establish Social Impact Funds	Adapting to Change	High	Long
Promote Knowledge Dissemination Beyond Academia	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Offer Non-Linear Career Development Workshops	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Provide Career Flexibility Coaching	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Develop Flexible Leadership Roles	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Build in Structured Time for Professional Development	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Provide Time-Understanding Training	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium
Establish Flexible Deadlines for Developmental Work	Adapting to Change	Medium	Medium

Create personalized mentoring opportunities	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Develop Collaborative Reflective Journals	Building Connections	Low	Short
Establish Reciprocal Mentorship Programs	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Foster Cross-Disciplinary Mentorship Networks	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Host Co-Learning Workshops	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Develop a Reflective Journal Platform	Building Connections	Low	Short
Introduce Peer Support Circles	Building Connections	Low	Short
Facilitate Interdisciplinary Teams	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Create Collaborative Professional Development Goals	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Support Peer-Mentoring Schemes	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Develop Mentoring Circles	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Host Purpose-Driven Networking Events	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Create Cross-Departmental Collaboration Spaces	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Establish Peer-Led Development Initiatives	Building Connections	Medium	Medium
Offer identity exploration workshops	Empowered Growth	Low	Short
Establish Reflective Practice Workshops	Empowered Growth	Low	Short
Encourage Reflexive Development Circles	Empowered Growth	Low	Short
Support Identity Exploration at Different Stages	Empowered Growth	Low	Medium
Create a Storytelling Mentorship Program	Empowered Growth	Low	Short

Host Storytelling Workshops	Empowered Growth	Low	Short
Provide Emotional Intelligence Training	Empowered Growth	Low	Medium
Create Personalised Work-Life Integration Plans	Empowered Growth	Medium	Short
Offer Flexible Working Arrangements	Empowered Growth	Low	Medium
Prioritise Well-Being Initiatives	Empowered Growth	Medium	Medium
Promote Individual Development Plans (IDPs)	Empowered Growth	Medium	Short
Offer Identity Exploration Workshops	Empowered Growth	Medium	Medium
Provide Tailored Mentorship Opportunities	Empowered Growth	Medium	Medium
Encourage individual development plans (IDPs)	Equity and Quality	Low	Short
Pilot Alternative Appraisal Systems	Equity and Quality	Low	Short
Conduct Holistic Development Evaluations	Equity and Quality	Medium	Medium
Recognize Non-Traditional Metrics of Success	Equity and Quality	Medium	Medium
Develop Recognition Systems for Emotional Labour	Equity and Quality	Medium	Medium
Offer Tailored Development Programs	Equity and Quality	Low	Short
Create Safe Spaces for Underrepresented Groups	Equity and Quality	Medium	Medium
Ensure Equitable Access to Development Opportunities	Equity and Quality	Medium	Medium
Develop Transparent Selection Processes for Development Opportunities	Equity and Quality	Low	Short
Provide Targeted Support for Underrepresented Groups	Equity and Quality	Low	Short
Regularly Monitor and Adjust Access to Development Programs	Equity and Quality	Medium	Medium

Create a Participatory Development Process	Navigating Power and Tensions	Medium	Medium
Implement Rotating Leadership Roles in Development Planning	Navigating Power and Tensions	Medium	Medium
Develop Open Channels for Anonymous Feedback	Navigating Power and Tensions	Low	Medium
Host Awareness Workshops on Power Dynamics	Navigating Power and Tensions	Low	Short
Introduce Rotating Leadership Positions in Development Planning	Navigating Power and Tensions	Low	Short

Each practical step is categorised according to the primary theme (out of the five themes identified in the thesis) that it aligns with, the estimated cost category, and the anticipated success timeline. The information below will explain the basis for the categorisations of each practical step.

Cost Categories

Low Cost: Activities requiring minimal financial investment, such as internal workshops, mentorship pairings, or reallocating existing resources without additional expenditure.

Medium Cost: Actions involving moderate investment, including hiring external facilitators, purchasing software, or implementing specific professional development programs.

High Cost: Initiatives necessitating substantial financial or structural resources, such as hiring new staff, restructuring organisational processes, or funding extended training programs.

Success Timelines

Short-Term: Impact expected within 6 months, focusing on quick wins or immediately actionable changes, such as reflective practice workshops or online platforms for peer discussions.

Medium-Term: Results anticipated between 6 months to 2 years, often involving incremental implementation or cultural shifts, such as the development of mentoring networks or adjustments to appraisal systems.

Long-Term: Outcomes realised over 2 years or more, typically associated with systemic or structural changes, such as implementing equitable development frameworks or redefining metrics of success.

The approaches outlined in this chapter emphasise the importance of flexibility, creativity, and contextual adaptation in professional development. While there are recurring themes across the suggested steps, such as mentoring, reflexivity, and collaboration, it is evident that there are many ways to implement these ideas. A single method, such as mentoring, can be approached from a variety of angles: as formalised programs, reciprocal relationships, or informal peer-driven initiatives. Each offers unique advantages and addresses different developmental needs. The value of these suggestions lies in presenting a menu of options that can be tailored to the needs of individuals within an organisational context.

It is also important to acknowledge that some of the ideas proposed here may already be in place within the college or wider institution. However, this does not negate their inclusion; rather, it reinforces the need to continually revisit and re-evaluate existing provisions. By examining these activities with fresh eyes and new perspectives, there is potential to refine, adapt, and better align them with evolving needs and goals. Revisiting old strategies with renewed purpose ensures they remain relevant and impactful, while also creating opportunities to weave them into new approaches to professional development.

These considerations underscore the core philosophy of this chapter, that professional development is not a one-size-fits-all programme. It requires ongoing attention to context, creativity in implementation, and an openness to revisiting what is already in place. By doing so, institutions and individuals can co-create developmental environments that inspire growth, enhance agency, and adapt to the ever-changing demands of academic and professional life.

Chapter Summary:

This chapter proposed a reimagined approach to professional development that departs from traditional top-down recommendations, instead fostering self-directed growth aligned with postmodern values of agency, identity, and decentralisation. By embracing a fluid and personalised perspective, these suggestions empower academics to take charge of their own development journeys, explore meaningful professional identities, and redefine metrics of success based on personal values rather than institutional demands. Themes included decentralising professional development, prioritising reflexivity, supporting evolving identities, embracing flexible mentorship, and creating equitable access, each with practical steps designed to inspire individual agency, collective learning, and a culture of empowerment.

In shifting the focus to context-sensitive, individual-centred growth, this chapter advocates for development opportunities that honour diversity in career trajectories, challenge commodification of knowledge, and foreground the value of emotional and relational dimensions of academic life. This perspective positions professional development as an evolving process, responsive to the complexities of identity, power, and institutional dynamics. It invites academics to view their growth not as a checklist of metrics but as a dynamic, adaptable path enriched by personal reflection, collaborative learning, and a deep sense of purpose.

7. Reflexive Reprise

This research journey has been more than just an academic exercise; it has been a transformative experience that has deeply reshaped my professional identity, research practices, and personal understanding of what it means to engage in a process of professional development. Throughout this process, I have encountered challenges that forced me to question established norms, struggled with ambiguity and contradiction, and discovered new pathways for personal and professional growth.

When I first undertook this research, I was still burdened with traditional views of research, underpinned by modernism, progress and the search for a single truth. I knew that I felt differently about the world, and I could feel the internal battle, as I fought to remove the dissonance. As I engaged more deeply with the principles of RTA and postmodernism, I started to limit that dissonance, embraced my active role in the research, and enjoyed enhancing my ability to critique and question grand narratives. It was exciting for me to be actively involved in the co-construction of knowledge with my participants, and the shift in perspective has been significant. It has fundamentally changed the way I see my role as a researcher and academic. No longer do I view myself as someone focussed on uncovering truths, but rather as someone who engages in a dialogue with the data, interpreting, questioning, and constructing meaning alongside the participants.

This redefined sense of professional identity has also reshaped how I view my place in the broader academic community. I now see my role as one that involves continuous critical engagement, not only with the data but also with the structures and norms within which I operate. I have come to understand that research, particularly qualitative research grounded in relativism, is never neutral or detached. It is inherently shaped by the researcher's positionality, background, and interactions with participants. This recognition has deepened my commitment to reflexivity as a core practice in both my research and professional life.

One of the most significant challenges I faced was learning to embrace ambiguity and complexity. Coming from a background steeped in more traditional, positivist approaches, I was initially drawn to the idea of clear answers and definitive outcomes. However, through this research, I came to understand that embracing uncertainty is not a weakness but a strength. Postmodernism's rejection of singular truths and RTA's emphasis on fluid, evolving meanings required me to let go of the need for certainty. Instead, I learned to appreciate the

richness that comes from exploring multiple realities and perspectives, even when they seem to contradict one another. This was not an easy transition, as diving into the latent meaning behind conversations, understanding myself as well as others, this can be hard and sometimes overwhelming. But in those moments, I realised that the discomfort was a sign of growth. Postmodernism, after all, encourages us to immerse ourselves in complexity and embrace the contradictions that define human experience. I found myself more open to the idea that not all research questions need to have clear-cut answers and that it is possible, and necessary, to sit with the uncertainty that often arises from qualitative research.

Throughout this research, I have been acutely aware of the power dynamics at play, both in my position as an insider within the institution and as a researcher. This dual role brought unique challenges, particularly around maintaining ethical boundaries and ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. I had to constantly reflect on how my position of influence might shape the data I collected, whether participants felt more guarded or, conversely, more open because of pre-existing relationships. Navigating those dynamics required me to remain ethically reflexive, questioning not only how participants perceived me but also how my own biases and assumptions influenced the research process. I managed to create a space where participants felt safe to share their stories, even when those stories included criticisms or reflections on the institution in which we both worked.

Engaging with postmodernism as a methodological framework has been one of the most intellectually stimulating aspects of this journey. It allowed me to utilise a part of myself that I had not touched upon for some time, particularly my undergraduate studies in Behavioural Science, affording me the chance to challenge not only traditional academic structures but also my own ingrained ways of thinking. Postmodernism's emphasis on deconstructing grand narratives and exposing power structures resonated deeply with me, particularly in the context of professional development in academia, where institutional discourses often shape how success is defined and valued. Postmodernism also offered me a critical lens through which to examine my own biases and assumptions. It pushed me to question not just the power dynamics present in the institution but also those inherent in my own research. By recognising that knowledge is always situated and context bound, I became more attuned to the subtle ways in which power operates, not just overtly through institutional policies but also through everyday interactions, expectations, and norms. This critical awareness has had a profound impact on my research practice. It has made me more sensitive to the voices that are often marginalised or overlooked in traditional research paradigms. I now approach my work with a heightened awareness of the need to amplify these voices and challenge the

structures that silence them. This is something I plan to carry forward into future research, as well as my teaching, ensuring that my work continues to disrupt established hierarchies and give space to the varying experiences that define human life.

Perhaps the most profound impact of this research has been on my own personal development. Engaging in reflexivity, constantly questioning my role, my assumptions, and my emotional responses, has been both challenging and rewarding. It has forced me to confront uncomfortable truths about myself and my place within the institution. But it has also offered me a new sense of clarity and purpose. One of the most important lessons I have learned is the power of vulnerability in research. By allowing myself to be vulnerable, by acknowledging my biases, uncertainties, and emotional responses, I was able to engage more deeply with the research process and the participants' stories. This vulnerability did not weaken my research, rather, it strengthened it by allowing me to connect more authentically with the participants and the data.

This research has fundamentally altered my understanding of professional development. Before, I was more likely to view development as a linear process, particularly around setting goals, acquiring skills, and achieving certain milestones. However, through this study, I have come to understand professional development as a much more fluid and context-dependent process. It is not about following a prescribed path but about navigating the complex and often contradictory demands of academic life, while finding ways to grow and evolve within those constraints. The participants' stories reinforced this understanding, as many spoke of the tension between institutional expectations and personal aspirations, between the demands of teaching and research, and between the desire for growth and the lack of time or resources to pursue it. Their experiences highlighted the importance of agency, of taking control of one's own development and defining success on one's own terms. This realisation has prompted me to rethink my own approach to professional development and to advocate for a more individualised, agency-driven approach within the institution.

As I reflect on my doctoral journey, one thing is clear, my commitment to lifelong learning has deepened. This research has shown me that professional and personal growth is not a destination but a continuous process of exploration, reflection, and evolution. I have learned to further value the journey, to explore the questions, understand the contradictions, and embrace the uncertainties. Moving forward, I plan to continue integrating reflexivity into my work, not just as a researcher but also as a teacher, mentor and colleague. I want to encourage others to embrace the fluidity of professional development, to challenge

institutional norms, and to define success on their own terms. I am also excited about the potential for future research, particularly in exploring marginalised voices and underrepresented experiences in academic development. There is so much more to uncover, and I am eager to continue pushing the boundaries of what professional development can and should be.

In conclusion, this research has been a journey of discovery, of myself, my participants, and the complexities of professional development. It has challenged me to think critically, to embrace uncertainty, and to engage deeply with the stories of those around me. I am excited for the opportunities that lie ahead, both for myself and for those I hope to inspire along the way.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the perceptions and experiences of academic staff regarding their professional development within a HE context, adopting a postmodern and relativistic framework that values context, subjectivity, and the fluid nature of reality. Driven by Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and grounded in a constructivist epistemology, the research aimed not only to interpret the narratives of participants but to critique and deconstruct traditional understandings of professional development.

Summary of Key Insights

By framing professional development within a relativistic ontology, this study rejects the notion of a singular 'truth' and instead reveals the multiple, situated realities that individuals experience. The study's RTA uncovered central areas of concern, including the role of time in professional development, tensions between institutional expectations and personal agency, and the impact of external frameworks such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) on academic identity. These themes shed light on the complex ways individuals navigate and interpret their development, highlighting contradictions, power dynamics, and the fluidity of professional identities within academia.

Methodological Contributions and Limitations

The study's adoption of postmodernism and RTA created a framework that not only interpreted participants' experiences but actively engaged with the complexities and ambiguities of academic life. The Franz Model of Engaged Scholarship was utilised as a tool for structuring interviews, allowing participants to articulate the internal and external forces shaping their professional development. However, the model's focus on high-level constructs also introduced limitations, as it prioritises broader organisational and community engagement over individual perspectives, potentially perpetuating power structures rather than dismantling them. Furthermore, the study's use of RTA, a method that inherently acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity, reinforced the interpretation as co-constructed rather than 'discovered,' yet introduces an unavoidable element of personal bias that challenges replicability.

Reflections on the Researcher's Role

As both an insider and a reflexive researcher, my positionality influenced every stage of this research, from formulating questions to analysing data. My background in human resource management and work psychology, paired with a newfound alignment with postmodern principles, shaped a study that is both subjective and introspective. My experiences allowed me to relate to participants' struggles and aspirations, but they also made me acutely aware of the biases I brought to the study, which are inseparable from the final analysis. This reflexive journey has deepened my understanding of postmodernism as a tool for critique, one that encourages a questioning stance but does not seek to prescribe concrete solutions. The research's findings are thus partial and context-bound illuminating particular aspects of professional development but resisting any claims of universal applicability.

Implications for Evolving Professional Development

This study highlights the importance of embracing professional development as a dynamic, co-constructed process rather than a prescriptive, top-down framework. Instead of offering rigid recommendations, the findings invite individuals and the organisation to consider professional development as a flexible and evolving journey, shaped by unique contexts, identities, and aspirations. This approach calls for the creation of spaces that empower staff to explore their own professional narratives, critically reflect on their roles, and engage with development opportunities in ways that resonate with their lived experiences. Integrating critical, reflexive practices into development initiatives, drawing on postmodernist and interpretivist ideas, can help staff navigate institutional structures with greater resilience and creativity. Rather than imposing predefined outcomes, evolving professional development thrives on adaptability, collaboration, and the acknowledgment of multiple pathways to growth.

Future Directions

The future lies in combining critical insights with pragmatic approaches that empower individuals while challenging institutional norms. For researchers and practitioners alike, this involves adopting a dual stance: one that embraces critique while remaining open to evolving developmental practices that prioritise individual agency and context. Future studies could build on these insights by exploring diverse institutional settings, applying RTA in different contexts, and examining the intersectionality of professional development experiences.

Final Reflections

In conclusion, this study contributes a unique and context-rich perspective on professional development within HE, merging postmodern critique with a constructive vision for evolution. The insights derived here highlight not only the complexities of academic life but also the necessity for ongoing reflection and adaptation. The study itself, shaped by relativistic and interpretivist principles, underscores that knowledge is not universal but inherently situated, co-constructed, and mutable. While this research cannot be fully replicated, its methodology, themes, and recommendations offer a foundation for others to critically engage with the layered, multifaceted experiences of professional growth in academia. Through this work, I hope to inspire continued exploration and challenge, advancing a field that values not only the knowledge gained but the individuals who produce it.

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