

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

## The Effects of Demographic Factors on Professional Career Success: An Investigation of Higher Education Staff in South Africa

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### Abstract

Professional career success has received great attention in the organisational management literature since the 1980s as organisations strive to attract and retain top talent, understanding the factors that contribute to career success has become imperative. Since it is an important topic for individuals, organisations and researchers, there have been efforts to comprehend the organisational elements and people-related factors that contribute to employees' professional career success. Located within the career development theory, this study aims to understand the sociodemographic aspects of academics that contribute to favourable perceptions of professional career success. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire on 253 male and female academics and the data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, namely the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests. The results of the empirical survey revealed that there were practical significant differences among academics concerning their job classification, professional experience, and their perceptions of their career as successful. Nonetheless, the findings reported no statistically significant differences among gender and age of academics and their perception of successful professional careers. Additionally, the results showed that job classification and professional experience of academics were significant predictors of professional career success since individuals with higher job classifications often have more autonomy and decision-making power within their organisations and departments. Individuals with more professional experience may have a better understanding of their industry and are required to comply with its requirements. These findings may enrich career success theories and offer developmental recommendations to support academics' professional career success in higher education institutions in South Africa.

**Keywords:** professional career success; demographic characteristics; professional experience; academic staff

### Introduction

Considering the financial difficulties that organisations are currently experiencing with the career success of employees, both employees and organisations experience significant challenges (Alzyoud, 2017). Given this fact, Pico-Saltos *et al.* (2021) posit that professional career success (PCS) is described as the accomplishment of personal happiness in four contexts, namely personal, professional, business and family. Success in a PCS is the study's main topic. Seema and Sujatha (2016) contend that success in the workplace enables people to satisfy their desires for power and achievement. For instance, consider a sales executive who consistently exceeds their targets and receives recognition and promotions within the organisation. This individual's desire for power and achievement is satisfied as they climb the corporate ladder, gaining more authority and influence over their team. Since it contributes to enhancing people's quantity or quality of life, the study of PCS is relevant, interesting, and valuable.

Tremblay *et al.* (2014) posit that the chance to achieve PCS is one of the most significant inducements that signal favourable treatment and long-term exchange between employees and organisations. Yet, Barton (2022) echoes that choosing a meaningful professional career path is not simple and it is hampered by inadequate exposure to

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working opportunities. These challenges often arise due to limited access to educational resources, lack of practical experience, and inadequate training opportunities. For instance, individuals from marginalised communities may face barriers to accessing quality education, which hinders their exposure to various skills. Additionally, the fast-paced nature of technological advancements requires individuals to continuously update their skills, making it challenging for them to keep up with the evolving demands of the job market. With an emphasis on the importance for employees to have careers that are fulfilling and satisfying for them, the statistics revealed that a person will work an average of 90,000 hours in their lifetime (Apollo Technical, 2022). This much time spent in the workplace can be demotivating and unfulfilling for employees if they are not satisfied with their careers. For example, a study conducted by Gallup (2017) found that disengaged employees are 37% more likely to experience higher absenteeism and 49% more likely to have accidents on the job.

Professional career success is, therefore, critical to people and organisations. Ishak (2015) corroborates this view as the author remarks: (1) PCS, at the personal level, is the achievement of growth, advancement, power, fulfilment and satisfaction as it aids in the formulation of effective career development plans; and (2) PCS at the organisational level aids human resource (HR) managers in creating successful career systems. However, Pico-Saltos *et al.* (2021) argue that any scientific disciplines, including administration, organisation, education, occupational psychology and HR, address PCS. Each of these disciplines contributes to the understanding of PCS in unique ways. For instance, administration and organisation studies focus on the management of resources and processes, which are essential for implementing PCS in workplaces. Education provides insights into the learning and development of individuals, which are crucial for promoting PCS among employees. Occupational psychology examines the psychological factors that influence behaviour and performance in the workplace, which can inform the design and implementation of PCS interventions. Finally, HR management deals with the recruitment, selection, and retention of employees, which are critical for creating a culture of PCS in organisations.

Furthermore, several sets of variables have been identified as relevant in predicting PCS. From the viewpoint of Seema and Sujatha (2016), these variables include human capital (education and work experience), sociodemographic (age, gender, and marital status), motivational (ambition and work centrality), and organisational (HR development programs and supervisor support) are the major sets of variables in predicting PCS. However, this study focuses on human capital and socio-demographics. Human capital, which encompasses education and work experience plays a crucial role in predicting PCS. Education provides individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to excel in their chosen fields; while work experience allows individuals to gain practical expertise and develop a strong professional network. Age may affect individuals' PCS as individuals at various stages of their lives may have varying levels of expectations, experience, and responsibilities. Gender can impact PCS due to societal biases and stereotypes. This study primarily investigates the PCS of academics in higher education institutions (HEI) in South Africa (SA), with a specific focus on the socio-demographic characteristics that influence it.

## **Problem Statement**

Since organisations from all over the world compete in the same market in the current era of economic globalisation, PCS is difficult to achieve during times of global economic recession, a time distinguished by unsteady careers (Alzyoud, 2017). Globalisation has led to increased interconnectedness and interdependence among economies, resulting in intensified competition among organisations. To mitigate the adverse effects of the recession, organisations resorted to cost-cutting measures, such as layoffs, downsizing, or freezing hiring processes. These actions created an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability within the workforce, making it difficult for individuals to achieve PCS. With the rise of outsourcing, offshoring, and the gig economy, job security has become increasingly precarious. Employees found themselves in temporary or contract positions, lacking the stability and long-term prospects necessary for PCS. Moreover, Alzyoud (2017) observes that past research on PCS has been in the Western context. Crisan (2021) underscores that academic career studies have primarily been researched in Western contexts, where faculty performance in terms of knowledge generation and dissemination is guided by the 'publish or perish' paradigm. Nonetheless, both in Western and African environments, there is a consensus that academic PCS research is still regarded as an under-researched field (Santos, 2016; Van der Klink *et al.*, 2014). This may be attributed to the lack of collaboration and knowledge exchange between African and Western scholars as well as the various socio-political challenges, including colonisation, post-colonial struggles, and economic instability faced by African countries.

Urquijo *et al.*, (2019) conclude that despite recent advancements in understanding the factors that contribute to PCS, there remains untapped potential for improvement in the realm of individual differences. While gender and age have been previously studied, position level and work experience have not yet been fully examined. Understanding the interplay between these variables and PCS would provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in determining PCS. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the effect of gender, age, job classification and professional experience on academics' PCS focusing on meeting the goals for the development of new skills, advancement, income, and the overall success of their career at one of the HEIs in SA to gain a better understanding of how they contribute to academic staff's PCS. To fulfil the study's purpose, the following goals were established:

- To determine if there is a difference in preference levels of men and women in meeting the goals for the development of new skills, advancement, income, and overall career success;
- To ascertain whether younger academics (-30 years old) and older academics (+60 years) have various levels of preference for PCS;
- To assess if there is a difference in preference levels between academics in higher positions (Deans) and those in low-level positions (Junior lecturers) in terms of their leadership roles within academic institutions;
- To establish whether the academics with longer professional experience (10 years+) will report a higher level of PCS than their counterparts with less professional experience (-5 years).

Universities in SA increasingly struggle with shrinking funds, rising workloads and temporary employment contracts and a decline in tenure-track positions (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2022). While it has become crucial for academics to have a long-lasting career, doing so has become increasingly difficult because of changes in both their work environment and content (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2022). One of the primary changes in this environment is the increasing pressure to meet institutional demands and expectations (Crisan, 2021). Hence, HEIs have become more focused on measurable outcomes and productivity, often prioritising quantity over quality. This shift has led to a greater emphasis on publishing research articles, securing grants, and obtaining external funding. Academics are compelled to allocate a significant amount of their time to these activities, often at the expense of other essential aspects of their work (teaching and mentoring students) (Crisan, 2021). As a result, Van Balena *et al.* (2012) posit that one of the main criticisms of existing research on academic PCS is that they tend to focus on identifying and addressing barriers that may hinder PCS, neglecting the factors that contribute to PCS. By overlooking this aspect, they lead to a narrow understanding of the challenges faced by academics in their PCS. For instance, while issues of work-life balance and lack of funding are undoubtedly important, they do not capture the full range of experiences and perspectives of academics. By broadening the scope of research to include PCS contributors, (growth opportunities), policymakers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of academics' PCS. Thus, the findings of this research can inform policy and practice in HE, leading to the development of targeted strategies to enhance academic support and PCS. Considering this, an effort is undertaken to quantify how gender, age, position level, and work experience affect the PCS of academics.

## Literature Review

The proposed study is located within the career development theory (CDT) as postulated by Super (1980). Super (1980) proposes that when people make decisions about their careers, they are expressing their evolving self-concept. The concept of self-concept refers to an individual's perception and understanding of themselves, including their beliefs, values, abilities, and aspirations. This self-concept is not static but rather evolves, influenced by individual experiences. As individuals progress through different life stages, their self-concept may undergo significant transformations. During adolescence, for example, individuals may explore different interests and abilities, leading to the formation of a preliminary self-concept. This evolving self-concept continues to develop during early adulthood as individuals gain more experiences. However, individuals are looking for employment fulfilment, which is PCS in positions and industries that allow them to express themselves and advance their self-PCS concept. Birt (2023) posits that employees' self-perceptions during the five stages of development, namely growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline, significantly influence their PCS. For instance, during the growth stage, employees may perceive themselves as having high potential and may be more satisfied with their careers. In contrast, during the decline stage, employees may perceive themselves as having limited potential and may be less satisfied with their careers. One might consider a work-life balance, for instance, more in their maintenance stage than in their establishment stage; even though a person's career remains the same, time and experience can alter how they view their PCS (Birt, 2023).

Therefore, CDT establishes a connection between employees' gender, age, job classifications, and professional experience to PCS. This theory is based on the premise that individuals' career paths are influenced by their characteristics and experiences. CDT suggests that these demographic characteristics can impact individuals' PCS in numerous ways. Gender plays a significant role in PCS, as societal norms and expectations often shape opportunities and barriers for individuals. For instance, women are often underrepresented in leadership positions and the statistics show that globally, less than a third of leadership positions are held by women (Baird, 2023), which can limit their career growth and success. Age can impact PCS; for example, older workers may face challenges in adapting to innovative technologies and work practices, which can impact their PCS. On the other hand, younger workers may lack the experience and skills needed to advance in their careers, which can hinder their perceptions of PCS. Different job classifications and professional experience categories may require different skills and qualifications, which can impact an individual's PCS. For example, individuals in managerial positions may require strong leadership skills, while those in technical positions may require specialised technical skills. Professional experience categories such as internships, volunteer work, and part-time jobs can also impact individuals' PCS by providing valuable experience and skills. By understanding the relationships among gender, age, job classifications, professional experience and PCS, CDT provides valuable insights into the complexities of PCS. Thus, the following hypotheses are formulated for the study:

- Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between academics' gender and PCS.
- Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between academics' age and PCS.
- Hypothesis 3: There is a significant relationship between academics' job classifications and PCS.
- Hypothesis 4: There is a significant relationship between academics' professional experience and PCS.

The new knowledge economy, which is the result of developments in HE over the past 25 years, has had an impact on how HEIs operate and how academic PCS is measured (Obers, 2014). Likewise, Crisan (2021) echoes that the HEI has evolved over the past few decades in line with trends that previously dominated industry, such as collaboration, competition, massification, internationalisation, and/or globalisation. Over the past 25 years, the advancements in the HE sector have led to a shift from objective measures to subjective ones when assessing PCS. This change has been driven by the increasing importance placed on knowledge creation, innovation, and critical thinking skills in the knowledge economy. One specific example of how the knowledge economy has influenced HE operations is the emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration. In the past, academic disciplines were often isolated, with little interaction between different fields of study. However, in the knowledge economy, there is a recognition that complex problems require multidisciplinary approaches. HEIs have responded to this by promoting interdisciplinary research and teaching, encouraging faculty members and students to work across traditional disciplinary boundaries. This has led to an increase in the number of students enrolled in HEIs, resulting in massification. Additionally, the internationalisation and globalisation of HEI have led to the establishment of partnerships and collaborations between institutions across borders. However, these changes have also resulted in increased pressure on academics to meet the demands of a more diverse student population, while also maintaining high standards of research and teaching. Hence, the evidence of these occurrences, with the diminished job security, has increased the expectations placed on academics, which could jeopardise their capacity to experience and maintain PCS (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015).

The topic of PCS was originally raised by Thorndike in 1934 (Seema and Sujatha, 2016). However, PCS has received more attention in the organisational management literature since the 1980s. This heightened interest can be attributed to the changing dynamics of the job market and the increasing competitiveness among professionals has made PCS a crucial aspect for individuals and organisations alike. As organisations strive to attract and retain top talents, understanding the factors that contribute to PCS has become imperative. Consequently, researchers and practitioners have focused on identifying the key determinants of PCS and developing strategies to enhance it. To understand PCS, it is critically important to understand what a career is. For Ingarianti *et al.* (2022), the term career denotes "a path an individual goes through related to their life-long work activities". It is defined by Chauhan, Mishra and Bhakri (2022) as an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organisations, which form a unique pattern over the individual's life span. Beginning in the 1980s, research on PCS was conducted and the construct was then defined by London and Stumpf (1982) as a good psychological sensation or related work accomplishment that one individual has steadily amassed. Such a definition has been extensively applied (Seibert *et al.*, 1999). Since PCS is an especially important topic for individuals, organisations and researchers, there have been efforts to comprehend the organisational elements and people-related factors

that contribute to employees' PCS. These efforts have resulted in the emergence of various findings, which can be illustrated through the study of Li *et al.*, (2022) focusing on the role of leadership in promoting PCS, found that leaders who provide clear goals, feedback, and support to their employees tend to have more successful teams. Other research has shown that organisations that prioritize employee development, recognition, and work-life balance tend to have higher levels of PCS among their employees (Park *et al.*, 2019).

The transition to a knowledge-based economy in the late 1990s brought about significant changes in the external environment, particularly in organisational contexts, which had a significant impact on employees' PCS (Qu *et al.*, 2022). In this twenty-first century, PCS was defined by Abele (2014) as the positive psychological or professional outcomes or accomplishments one accumulates because of professional experiences. According to Seema and Sujatha (2016), it is described as the good feelings and professional accomplishments that people have gained through their job experience. A definition of PCS that is frequently mentioned in modern literature and that is the baseline of this study since it focuses on the intrinsic nature of PCS is the one from Mirvis and Hall (1994: 366) "the experience of achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual, rather than those set by parents, peers, an organisation, or society". Abele (2014) distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic PCS, using career satisfaction as the yardstick for intrinsic PCS and money and employment status as the yardstick for extrinsic PCS. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors are not mutually exclusive; they often intertwine and have an impact on each other. For instance, while career satisfaction may be driven by internal factors such as personal fulfilment and passion for the work, external factors like salary and job security can also play a role in shaping one's overall satisfaction. A person may find their work intrinsically fulfilling, but if they are not adequately compensated or do not have stable employment, it can diminish their overall satisfaction.

Pico-Saltos *et al.* (2021) contend that success in a professional career is a mutual endeavour in the professional field; instead of being seen as an objective reality in today's world, it is viewed as a social construction. In the same vein, Beigi *et al.* (2018) posit that scholars' attention steadily switched from objective metrics to subjective definitions of success as new (contemporary, boundaryless) professional careers replaced old (traditional, organisation-based) ones. A good employee's contribution was typically recognised in traditional organisational careers by extrinsic benefits like job security, promotions, or pay raises (Tremblay *et al.*, 2014). The employee–organisation relationship (EOR) has changed from a relationship based on long-term commitment and internal career progression to a more short-term relationship and a self-based career, in which the definition of success includes work–life satisfaction and a meaningful job (Tremblay *et al.*, 2014). Qu *et al.* (2022) note that the indicators of extrinsic success can be seen and measured from the outside, such as financial success (salary and property), social class (status and title), and political influence. PCS, seen from the standpoint of the individual, seems to be the process of acquiring materialistic growth, power, happiness, and contentment (Seema and Sujatha, 2016). Intrinsic success is an intrinsic assessment of individuals and relates to the career satisfaction attained by people both within and outside of the workplace (Qu *et al.*, 2022).

Guo *et al.* (2012) state that the characteristics that determine PCS are influenced by personal, organisational, and social factors. Greenberg (2004) defines demographic factors as distinctions between individuals in an organisation, such as gender, age, personality, cognitive style, tenure, organisational role, and educational background. Firstly, gender stereotypes and biases can influence how individuals are treated within the organisation, affecting their perception of PCS. Secondly, age can influence the perception of PCS since younger employees may have different expectations and needs compared to older employees. For example, younger individuals may seek opportunities for growth and development, while older employees may prioritise stability and recognition. Later, Mazilu and Mitroi (2010) define demographic factors as a descriptive segmentation strategy in which sociodemographic factors are directly involved. Recently, Amegayibor (2021) defined them as elements that provide context for a business and its personnel depending on their nomenclature. Anovunga, N-yelbi and Akpadago (2021) argue that many interconnected personality traits, including gender, interest, abilities, values, self-concept, intelligence, and ethnicity, as well as societal and cultural factors like socioeconomic status, social class, family structure, relationships, and culture, have a certain impact on PCS. In the same vein, Sujatha (2016) asserts that many variables, including human characteristics like gender, age, and education, as well as personal environmental interactions, have traditionally been used to examine the PCS of employees. Van der Heijden *et al.* (2022) remark that academic institutions are not exempt from the increasing issues that the ageing and rejuvenation of the working population provide for the management of organisations. As a result, gender is considered because based on the literature, women academics have lower chances of receiving tenure and face greater obstacles and discrimination to succeed in their careers (Ooms *et al.*, 2019; Santos, 2016; Afiouni and

Karam, 2014). Moreover, Crisan (2021) and Santos (2016) argue that the pressure younger academics experience to publish demonstrates that age is another crucial factor in determining PCS.

This study addresses this evidence by evaluating how gender, age, job classification and professional experience affect academics' PCS. Job classification refers to the categorisation of positions within an academic institution based on factors such as rank, responsibilities, and authority. Professional experience is the cumulative knowledge, skills, and expertise gained through years of practice and engagement in the academic field.

## Methodology

This study, conducted in a HEI in SA, contained no risk for the staff involved. Before undertaking this research endeavour, an ethical clearance was obtained from the university's management to ensure that this study complied with the ethical principles of the institution under investigation. Two University of Technology campuses in SA were selected because of their proximity to the authors. A post-positivist paradigm and a descriptive research design centred on a cross-sectional survey and a quantitative research approach were used to investigate 253 academics out of 405 staff members. The study's participants were chosen by convenience sampling per their availability for data collection. More precisely, it comprises academics who were engaged on a contract basis as well as those who are employed permanently, both male and female. The investigation involved personnel from every faculty, from Heads of Departments (HoD) and professors (job grade level 5) to laboratory technicians and junior lecturers (also known as developmental lecturers' posts) and lecturers (job grade level 9), associate professors (job grade level 6), lecturers (job grade level 8), senior lecturers (job grade level 7), and executive deans (job grade level 4). The participants were handed a three-part questionnaire. Five subcategories of information about the respondents were provided in the demographic section: gender, age, highest level of education attained, work experience, and job grade levels. PCS scale's items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Five-item PCS questionnaire, adapted from Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990: 66), gauged how satisfied workers were with their PCS.

## Results and Discussion

The results indicated that the respondents were predominantly men, representing 59.7% (n=151) of the sample and women formed the minority (n=102; 40.3%). With regards to the age categories, a total of 35.7% of respondents were between 30 and 39 years of age (n=90), 27.0% of respondents were between 40 and 49 years old (n=68), 15.9% and 15.1% of respondents were aged between 50 and 59 years (n=40) under 30 years old (n=38), and 6.3% of respondents were 60 years old and over (n=16). Regarding the professional experience of respondents, 44.4% of them had a professional experience of more than 10 years (n=111), 34.0% had 5 to 10 years of professional experience (n=85) and 21.6% had less than 5 years of professional experience (n=54). Concerning the job classification, the results showed that 64.7% of respondents were lecturers (level 8; n=163), 17.9% senior lecturers (level 7; n=45), 11.1% junior lecturers and lab technicians (level 9; n=28), 3.2% heads of departments and professors (level 5; n=8), 2.4% associate professors (level 6; n=6) and 0.8% executive deans (level 4; n=2).

First, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to estimate the reliability of the scale as reported in Table 1:

**Table 1:** Reliability coefficients of PCS scale

Scale	Number of items	Number of items deleted	Cronbach's alpha
PCS	5	0	.918

The results shown in Table 1 reveal that the reliability coefficients of the PCS scale yielded satisfactory values (0.918). These values indicate a reliable instrument as values exceeded the 0.7 benchmarks.

These results of the descriptive analysis are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Professional career success (PCS)

Item description	Mean	Std. deviation
1. I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career	3.54	1.135
2. I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals	3.62	1.035
3. I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards meeting my goals for income	3.16	1.202
4. I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards meeting my goals for advancement	3.36	1.084
5. I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards meeting my goals for the development of new skills	3.57	1.031
<b>Valid N=253</b>		
<b>1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree and 5=Strongly agree</b>		

On examining the means in Table 2, employees are neutral in their responses. These results revealed that employees of this organisation have uncertain perceptions about PCS. Employees in institutions of HE often have uncertain perceptions about PCS due to a variety of factors. One reason for this uncertainty may be the ever-changing nature of the HE landscapes. Relatedly, Kanyane (2023) argues that open access to education and the ability for faculty and students to virtually connect and share knowledge across geographic locations and time zones were enhanced by digital technologies. Du Plessis *et al.* (2022) add that due to COVID-19, many institutions were forced to identify and put into practice a variety of strategies that helped to sustain academic success and these include, but were not limited to, redistributing budgets to meet the emerging needs, allowing staff members to work from home, engaging in emergency remote learning and teaching, and finding alternative ways to support students. Hence, with these advancements in technology and shifts in educational priorities, employees may find it challenging to navigate their career paths and determine what success looks like in their field. As Yende (2021) notes, the academic staff lacks the necessary skills to react quickly to the evolving digital demands of the workplace. It makes sense that 24% of Africans have access to reliable internet connectivity, which contributes to digital disparities that make it difficult to continue teaching and learning (Kanyane, 2023). These issues within HEIs exacerbate these uncertainties and leave employees feeling unsure about their prospects for success.

Another factor that contributes to the uncertain perceptions about career success in HE is the lack of standardised metrics for evaluating performance. Unlike some industries where success can be easily quantified through sales figures or profit margins, success in HE is often measured through subjective criteria such as teaching evaluations or research output. This subjectivity can lead to ambiguity and differing interpretations of what constitutes PCS. Van Balena *et al.* (2012:314) underscored this view as they stated that “the academic career system has unique features, which have made it different from the conventional hierarchical, bureaucratic model of careers”. Crisan (2021) goes on to argue that the higher progression criteria and expectations set for academics indicate the ‘publish or perish’ or research competitiveness approach. The existence of this strategy is tied to the new public management approach used by universities, which has an impact on academics’ lives and academic PCS.

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify the structure of the construct of PCS by analysing the correlations between the variables and specifying a set of common underlying dimensions, known as factors. Initially, the PCS scale was tested for uni-dimensionality. Before this exercise, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s tests were computed to establish whether the data set is suitable for factor analysis as reported in Table 3.

**Table 3:** KMO and Bartlett’s test

<b>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (PCS)</b>		<b>.780</b>
<b>Bartlett’s test of sphericity</b>	Approx. chi-square	1000.637
	df	10
	Sig.	.000

Based on the analysis in Table 3, The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was above 0.7 (Uden, Heričko, & Ting, 2015) and the Bartlett test of sphericity suggested significance at  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that the data set was suitable for factor analysis for PCS. Then, the PCS scale was tested for uni-dimensionality. The criteria for the number of factors to be extracted were based on eigenvalues and the percentage of variance explained with only those having eigenvalues equal to or greater than one being considered significant. Factors with low eigenvalues did not contribute significantly to the overall variability of the data and were therefore excluded from further analysis. These results are reported in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Eigenvalues and percentage of variance

Component	Eigenvalues	% of variance	Cumulative %
PCS	3.784	75.684	75.684

From Table 4, one significant and interpretable factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1.00 was extracted for the PCS construct; thus, confirming the uni-dimensionality of the scale.

**Non-parametric results**

Since the data did not meet the assumptions of parametric techniques (normal distribution), non-parametric tests were used to measure data on nominal (categorical) and ordinal (ranked) scales, namely the Mann-Whitney test and the Kruskal-Wallis test. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to establish whether there are any significant differences between PCS and gender categories of respondents. These results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Professional career success (PCS) and gender

PCS	Gender	N	Mean rank
	1 (Male)	151	127.20
	2 (Female)	102	126.70
	Total	253	
Mann-Whitney U			7670.500
Wilcoxon W			
Z			-0.054
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			0.957

a. Mann-Whitney test

b. Grouping variable: Gender

The results show that there was no statistically significant distinction observed in the scores of male (mean=127.20) and female (mean=126.70) participants with their PCS ( $U=7670.500$ ,  $z=-0.054$ ,  $p=0.957$ ,  $z=-0.054$ ,  $N=253$ ). The analysis of the data revealed that there was no notable variation between the two genders in terms of their PCS scores. This suggests that both male and female respondents had similar levels of PCS, as indicated by the mean scores of 127.20 and 126.70, respectively. The absence of a significant difference between the two groups implies that gender does not play a significant role in determining the PCS scores of the participants. This is evidenced by the effect size value of  $r=0.00$ , which suggests that there was no practical effect. As a result, hypothesis H1, which posited that there would be a difference in perception between male and female respondents, is refuted. The findings in Table 5 resonate with those of Muchtar and Qamariah (2023), who reported that academic PCS for employees at universities does not seem to differ significantly on the surface. Regardless of gender differences, there are many job accomplishments in the highest positions at the university, such as professors and other important positions (Muchtar and Qamariah, 2023). The results may imply that gender equality is well-established in the HE sector in SA.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to establish whether there are any significant differences between PCS and the age of respondents. These results are reported in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Professional Career Success (PCS) Scale and age

PCS	Age categories	N	Mean rank
	1 (Under 30 years)	38	130.82
	2 (30-39 years)	90	121.29
	3 (40-49 years)	69	132.40
	4 (50-59 years)	40	124.36
	5 (60 years and over)	16	133.38
	Total	253	
Test statistics <sup>b</sup>			
Kruskal-Wallis H		1.218	
Df		4	
Asymp. Sig.		.875	

a. Kruskal Wallis test

b. Grouping variable: Age

The results in Table 6 indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the age of the participants ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.218$ ,  $p = 0.875$ ). The mean rank for each group was calculated as follows: group 1 (under 30 years) had



a mean rank of 130.82, group 2 (30-39 years) had a mean rank of 121.29, group 3 (40-49 years) had a mean rank of 132.40, group 4 (50-59 years) had a mean rank of 124.36, and group 5 (60 years and over) had a mean rank of 133.38. These findings suggest that there were no significant differences in the age distribution among the different groups of respondents concerning their PCS. Hence, hypothesis H2 was rejected. This implies that organisations should focus on providing equal opportunities to all employees regardless of their age, and individuals should prioritise developing their skills and knowledge to enhance their PCS. These results are partially consistent with the results of Heslin *et al.* (2019) in that age was shown to be positively associated with extrinsic PCS but not connected to intrinsic PCS. In line with this, Järleström *et al.* (2020) revealed that older respondents are more likely to have received a promotion throughout their careers. Table 7 presents the results of the difference between PCS and the job classifications of respondents.

**Table 7:** Difference between PCS and job classifications

PCS	Job classifications	N	Mean rank
	4 (EDs)	3	153.83
	5 (HoDs and professors)	6	208.50
	6 (Associate professors)	8	125.25
	7 (Senior lecturers)	45	110.26
	8 (Lecturers)	163	130.96
	9 (Junior lecturers and laboratory technicians)	28	111.02
Total	253		
Test statistics <sup>b</sup>			
Kruskal-Wallis H		12.191	
Df		5	
Asymp. Sig.		.032	

a. Kruskal Wallis test,

b. Grouping variable: Job classifications

Table 7 indicates that there is a significant difference in the job classifications of the respondents. The test yielded a  $\chi^2$  (2) value of 12.191 and a p-value of 0.032. The mean rank for each group was as follows: 153.83 for EDs, 208.50 for HoDs and professors, 125.25 for associate professors, 110.26 for senior lecturers, 130.96 for lecturers, and 111.02 for junior lecturers and laboratory technicians. These findings revealed that HoDs and professors had the highest mean rank and senior lecturers had the lowest mean rank. Thus, hypothesis H3 was accepted. Partially synchronous to these findings, the study of Järleström *et al.* (2020) reveals that position was discovered to be a statistically significant predictor of PCS. The authors explained that the higher the position attained, the more frequently the respondents will have received promotions throughout their careers and the greater their PCS. Janssen *et al.* (2021) provide further explanation to this study's findings as they assert that employees in higher hierarchical positions frequently have greater access to resources for career development, which makes it easier for them to further achieve PCS. Shockley *et al.* (2016), validate this view as they argue that people who view their professions favourably grow more psychological resources throughout their careers, such as self-efficacy and PCS. Table 8 displays the differences between PCS and the professional experience of respondents.

**Table 8:** Difference between professional career success (PCS) scale and professional experience

PCS	Professional experience	N	Mean rank
	1 (less than 5 years)	54	150.23
	2 (between 5 to 10 years)	86	116.05
	3 (more than 10 years)	113	124.23
	Total	253	
Test statistics <sup>b</sup>			
Kruskal-Wallis H		7.609	
Df		2	
Asymp. Sig.		.022	

a. Kruskal Wallis test

b. Grouping variable: Professional experience

Table 8 revealed a notable disparity in the professional experience, measured in the number of years, among participants. The statistical test,  $\chi^2$  (2) = 7.609, p = 0.022, indicated that this difference was statistically significant. Upon further examination, it was found that the mean rank of individuals with less than 5 years of experience, was

150.23. In contrast, respondents with 5 to 10 years of experience, had a lower mean rank of 116.05. Lastly, participants with more than 10 years of experience, had a mean rank of 124.23. In other words, employees with less professional experience in terms of years, are more likely to perceive their career as successful. Thus, hypothesis H4 was accepted. This may imply that they are still unsure of how the institution's mechanisms operate. On the other hand, academics with more professional experience did not offer any positive boost to PCS. This discovery is especially surprising, and the reason might be that academics with extensive professional experience are expected to perform more effectively in their positions, compared to those with less experience. Thus, they do not necessarily perceive PCS the same as the new academics. As Sutherland and Petersen (2009: 6) remark, "While success is arguably a personal construct (Ketteridge *et al.*, 2002), the literature makes a strong case for success in academia being primarily associated with research, specifically, research output (Gingras *et al.*, 2008), research quality (Nir and Zilberstein-Levy, 2006), research productivity (Cinlar and Dowse, 2008) and competitive grant funding".

The contributions to the theory and practice of job classification and professional experience on PCS in Africa are of utmost importance. Firstly, job classification plays a crucial role in determining the opportunities and growth prospects available to individuals in their careers. In Africa, where the job market is diverse and dynamic, having a clear understanding of job classifications can help individuals navigate through various industries and sectors. Different job classifications may require specific skills, qualifications, and experiences, which can significantly PCS. For instance, a higher job classification may offer better salary packages, more responsibilities, and/or increased chances of promotion. Therefore, individuals need to align their professional experiences accordingly to enhance their perceptions of PCS. Secondly, professional experience holds immense value in shaping PCS in Africa. Employers in Africa often prioritise candidates with relevant work experience, as it demonstrates practical knowledge and skills. Thus, it allows individuals to develop industry-specific expertise, build a network of contacts, and gain a deeper understanding of the African job market. Moreover, it provides individuals with the opportunity to showcase their abilities and achievements, which can enhance their credibility and increase their perceptions of PCS. Therefore, individuals should actively seek opportunities to gain relevant professional experience through internships, apprenticeships, or volunteering.

The effects of gender, age, job classification and professional experience on the PCS of academics were assessed. To strengthen the applicability of the research findings, other contributing variables and factors can be included in future investigations. Future studies using a mixed-method approach may elaborate more on the effects of demographics such as salary level, marital status, types of institutions (private and public), number of children and educational levels on PCS. Furthermore, due to data accessibility, the impact of demographics on PCS was only examined in the context of one institution. Therefore, these results can only be generalised to a certain extent. Further studies are required to determine whether the results of the current study can be replicated in other learning environments for example classical universities, universities of technologies, South African HEIs, and/or other African HEIs. To acquire a comprehensive picture of PCS, future studies may use a longitudinal approach by integrating different components such as non-academic staff, corporate staff and more than one institution or organisation. Also using self-report measures to assess the constructs was a study flaw. Subjects might have provided answers that were more societally acceptable than the situation's reality. Because participants might not have been able to accurately assess themselves, various biases could have affected the results. Future studies may consider exploring alternative assessment methods to self-report such as incorporating peer evaluations or supervisor assessments, to triangulate and validate the findings related to PCS constructs. Finally, since PCS constructs may change over time, using a cross-sectional research design prevented the identification of meaningful causal relationships among variables. Zhang *et al.* (2022) underscore that PCS is "a cumulative outcome produced by the aggregation of behaviour over a relatively long period". Relatedly, Tremblay *et al.* (2014) affirm that a large body of research has shown how career success is a dynamic and social construction rather than a static concept. Future researchers may consider using a longitudinal research design to capture the dynamic nature of PCS.

## Conclusions

The results of this study showed that job classification and professional experience are significant predictors of PCS since individuals with higher job classifications often have access to more resources, opportunities, and higher salaries. Furthermore, individuals with more professional experience may have a better understanding of their industry and may be required to act accordingly as they know better. Gender and age did not have an impact on

PCS. The primary implication is that the success of academics in their professional careers is influenced by the specific context of the HE sectors through publications and recognition. These factors not only highlight an academic's research capabilities but also enhance their reputation and provide opportunities for collaboration and networking. The findings presented in this study provide valuable insights into the significance of job classification and professional experience on the PCS of academics in their careers. The results indicate that individuals in higher job classifications tend to have a greater perception of success in their careers compared to those in lower classifications. This suggests that by attaining higher job classifications, academics gain access to a range of privileges, opportunities, and benefits such as increased autonomy, greater influence in decision-making processes, the ability to shape their research agendas, funding opportunities, research grants, and prestigious awards, all of which contribute to the overall success and reputation of academics in their respective fields. It was also revealed that individuals in academia who possess a wealth of practical experience are inclined to attain greater levels of PCS. This underscores the importance of continuous learning, research, and engagement in academic activities to enhance one's professional experience and increase the likelihood of PCS. By consistently seeking new knowledge, individuals can enhance their understanding of their field and stay up to date with the latest advancements and trends. Moreover, by attending conferences, seminars, and workshops, academics can network with experts in their field, exchange ideas, and gain valuable insights that can further enhance their PCS.

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