'Entering the world of academia is like starting a new life': a trio of reflections from Health Professionals joining academia as second career academics

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'Entering the world of academia is like starting a new life': a trio of reflections from Health Professionals joining academia as second career academics

Nicoline Herman[a], Maria Jose[b], Misiwe Katiya[c], Merlisa Kemp[d], Natalie le Roux[b], Claudia Swart-Jansen van Vuuren[a] and Charmaine van der Merwe[a]

[a]Centre for Teaching and Learning, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa; [b]University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa; [c]FUNDANI, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa; [d]Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This research explored the experiences of three health professionals transitioning into academia as second-career academics (SCAs), with the aim of gaining insight into potential enablements and constraints for such career changers. The process of redefining identity from expert health professional to novice academic could occur through a three-stage process of transitioning. However, if SCAs experience an unsupportive or 'care-less' environment, such redefining may not occur. The paper attempts to illuminate the crucial role of educational developers in understanding and supporting SCAs when they 'start a new life' in academia.

Introduction

A large proportion of newly appointed academics enter academia as 'early career' or 'first-career' academics, following the traditional PhD trajectory and immersion in academic culture (Simendinger et al., 2000; Smith & Boyd, 2012). Early career academics have been the subject of many educational developers' inquiries (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Sutherland, 2017; Sutherland & Taylor, 2011). 'Second-career academics' (SCAs), or academics who enter academia after a number of years working as professionals and having a well-developed professional identity (Dash, 2018), seem to be less well described in the educational development literature. Though their experience of transitioning into academia has previously been reported on in the health professions literature (Hurst, 2010; Murray et al., 2014a, 2014b), the implications for supporting SCAs likewise seems to be poorly represented in the educational development literature. This paper aims to fill this gap by drawing on the transition experiences of health professionals entering higher education institutions as SCAs.

Background

Fitzmaurice (2013, p. 613) reminds us 'that becoming an academic is a cognitive and emotive process, as well as a moral endeavour grounded in virtues of honesty, care and

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CONTACT Nicoline Herman ✉ nherman@sun.ac.za

compassion'. The personal challenges when transitioning into academia relate to changes in identity and teaching practice (Smith & Boyd, 2012). The notion of 'transition' is understood as 'a process that involves mobility from one state to another; often disengaging from a prior role and engaging in one that is new' (Hurst, 2010, p. 214). As professionals, SCAs bring with them a wealth of highly regarded disciplinary experience, concrete examples, and current knowledge (Simendinger et al., 2000). Upon entering academia, they however need to 'change professions' and require different kinds of knowledge and skills (Smith & Higgs, 2013) for their new careers as lecturers.

Adapting to new, unfamiliar tasks and value systems in higher education (HE) might be challenging for SCAs from a clinical background. For them, career transitioning is a 'boundary-crossing activity' (Wenger, 1998), which extends into a change in culture (Simendinger et al., 2000) and identity (Smith & Boyd, 2012), as clinical settings and universities have different cultures, practices, and languages (Trowler & Knight, 2000). Many SCAs experience the career transitioning as stressful and even traumatic (Dash, 2018). According to Smith and Higgs (2013), the flatter, less structured organisational structure of universities as well as the distributed leadership approach, involving less direct supervision, might lead to feelings of alienation, lack of support, and unclear communication for SCAs used to working in a health science environment. Due to the foreign nature of university culture, newcomer SCAs have reported feelings of isolation, anxiety, and lack of confidence, but also feelings of excitement about and satisfaction from nurturing and being responsible for students' learning (McArthur-Rouse, 2008; Smith & Boyd, 2012; Smith & Higgs, 2013).

SCAs might encounter an uncomfortable shift in identity from clinician to academic, and from being experts in their previous careers to novices in their new academic role (McArthur-Rouse, 2008), as 'expert novices'. SCAs could experience these changes as 'losses' with implications for their identities. Professional support and a process of acculturation could aid with transitioning into academia (Trowler & Knight, 2000) and would allow SCAs space and time to develop teaching identities, both formally and informally. Educational developers have a vital role to play in assisting SCAs with this holistic transition.

A very similar, three-stage process for health professionals transitioning into academia was suggested by McArthur-Rouse (2008), Smith and Higgs (2013), and Murray et al. (2014a). During stage one, the SCA retains strong feelings of identity as a health professional and draws on professional expertise to validate and add credibility to their role as a teacher. Feelings of vulnerability and newness might prevail. During stage two, the newcomers experience feelings of a loss of status and thus of being novices – as no longer being an expert amongst experts (Boyd, 2010). Their own lack of preparedness for working in academia is an unexpected experience and the unstructured nature of the context might lead to confusion, conflict, and loss of identity. During the last stage, SCAs are comfortable to redefine themselves by integrating their professional and academic identities, as they become academics. The construction of new identities when entering academia, is however fraught with difficulties (Smith & Boyd, 2012). If SCAs cannot redefine themselves, they might decide to leave academia.

Due to the challenges that SCAs face, it is crucial to have an understanding of the transitioning process so as to provide the necessary support. Creating nurturing communities where SCAs can flourish is one means of potentially offering such support.

Nurturing or 'care-full' environments are 'populated with professional care' (Herman et al., 2018, p. 103) and could create an atmosphere where SCAs feel valued, enjoy high levels of trust, and where communication is clear and effective. The alignment of educational development programmes with the unique needs of SCAs is imperative for ensuring such 'care-full' spaces (Hurst, 2010; Simendinger et al., 2000).

The New Academics' Transitions Regional Colloquium (NATRC) research project and methodology

To foster a community of practice (CoP) among newly appointed academics at four universities in close geographical proximity, a regional colloquium was organised. At the time, all participants were involved in academic induction programmes at their respective institutions. For the colloquium, participants prepared mini-research presentations identifying and theorising their own and their students' challenges with teaching and learning. The colloquium afforded participants the opportunity to develop confidence in their presentation and research skills, and to embrace all aspects of being an academic in HE today. Another potential goal was collaboration towards a publication.

This paper is the result of one such collaboration and reports on research undertaken to answer the question of how SCAs, as a specific group of newly appointed academics, make sense of identity challenges. The paper accordingly responds to the following questions:

- How do SCAs transition from their professional identity to that of an academic?
- What is gained and lost when transitioning into the new identity?
- How do SCAs navigate challenges during their transitioning?
- What have been enablers and barriers for developing agency?

The study was participatory and qualitative. An interpretative approach was used to make sense of the data and construct meaning out of the experiences and contexts of the professionals turned academics (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as reflected on and reported by themselves. Data were generated through two reflective narratives written by each of the participating SCAs. The first reflective narrative focused on their colloquium presentations, while the second was an individual narrative response to the questions stated above. The first phase of data analysis was a reading of the written reflective pieces by all researchers to become familiar with the data, thus allowing the data to speak, and then assigning preliminary codes and themes. SCAs afterwards coded and thematically analysed their own narrative writing according to these same themes. Afterwards the preliminary themes were reviewed and clustered by all authors according to the three stages of identity transition described above. Refinement took place during discussions and the collaborative writing process.

The research was undertaken by seven female professionals: three SCAs and four educational developers (Table 1). The SCAs were health professionals from two different institutions, while the educational developers likewise represented two different institutions. A fourth SCA withdrew and her data are not included.

Table 1. Biographies of participants.

Participants	Biography
Participant 1 from Institution 1	… was a new academic, a medical doctor who has been permanently employed as a course convenor in a research-intensive university for 2.5 years. She coordinated full-time courses for undergraduate medical students. Towards the end of this study she left the university to pursue other opportunities.
Participant 2 from Institution 2	… was a new academic, a vascular sonographer who has been permanently employed as a lecturer at a university of technology for 3 years. She lectured 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year BSc students. She was a doctoral candidate and co-supervised an MSc student.
Participant 3 from Institution 1	… was a new academic, a research psychologist employed at a research-intensive university. After 30 months she left academia and went into a professional position at the institution. Her reflections in this study were based on her experiences when she originally joined academia.
Participant 4 from Institution 3	Withdrew and her data are not included
ED participants	3 ED participants from Institution 3. 1 ED participant from Institution 2.

Ethical clearance

Participation in the project was voluntary. Participants understood issues of sensitivity, confidentiality, and anonymity, and they gave their consent. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of participants and institutions were removed.

Findings and discussion

The participants in this study entered academia as health professionals with extensive clinical experience and an established identity. Although the SCAs came from different healthcare professions and joined different departments within different universities, all of them experienced the three stages of identity development to varying degrees.

Stage 1: drawing on a previous identity

During stage one of transitioning into academia, SCAs usually retain strong links with their established identity and draw on their professional expertise to validate and add credibility to their role as teacher. All participants experienced this first stage. Participant Two described her entrance to academia as 'starting a new life where you have to prove your worth in order to be acknowledged by your colleagues'. She continued by describing her transition in terms of feeling undervalued and demotivated:

> Entering the academic environment was a completely different and demotivating experience at first … my specialised skills were not acknowledged … I felt undervalued (Participant 2).

Lave and Wenger (1991) indicated that individuals become legitimate members of a community when they are allowed to participate in, and contribute to, the set of practices of the community. Participation thus gives legitimacy. According to Participant Three, she was not allowed to participate, and her 'prior experience was never called upon. It was as if I was a blank slate and new words had to be written on this slate'. For Participant One it was also surprising and challenging that health science academics treated her differently, 'which seemed odd as I had completed my training and

had real world work experience in the field of medicine'. These SCAs thus validated their self-worth through their disciplines and previous positions in the health professions environment, while colleagues in academia seemed to disregard these and treated the SCAs as newcomers to an already-established community to which they seemingly had nothing to contribute.

Their 'newness' led to feelings of vulnerability: when they were not valued for their professional expertise, they felt alienated and side-lined. Small suggested 'changes were met with scepticism and reasons why [they] could not be done. New innovative ways to improve systems and ways of doing were met with resistance. Conformity to the traditional way [became] an important aspect for survival and acceptance' (Participant 3). She continued by describing the painful experience when 'my voice was not heard' and how she subsequently did not become a legitimate participant in the academic community.

Stage 2: identity in turmoil

During stage two of becoming an academic, SCAs often feel like novices. This unpreparedness for a new career is unexpected and leads to feelings of confusion, conflict, and loss. While during stage one participants drew on their previous identity, now they experienced a loss of identity while simultaneously starting to see themselves as academics. Again, this stage was visible in the experiences of all research participants. Participant One, previously a clinician, indicated that her journey into academia resulted in a loss of her professional identity, as students labelled her 'not a real doctor [in the university environment]'. She also reported that the decision to join academia led to the loss of even more:

> as my identity changed, I may have lost some things, social standing, higher income, respect of junior colleagues (Participant 1).

University academics usually have the responsibility of teaching students, doing research, and interacting with communities. Feeling unprepared due to a lack of knowledge and expertise is challenging. Participant One indicated she 'had to brave being in a new field, learning educational jargon and navigating the uncertainty of student protests'. Participant Two acknowledged she had 'no formal qualification in teaching, was unfamiliar to an academic environment and [had] no knowledge of teaching strategies'.

For Participant One, her unpreparedness was highlighted during the countrywide #FeesMustFall (#FMF) student protests that disrupted most campuses from 2015 to 2017. This context had a profound influence on her experiences as she 'started working [in HE] when the first wave of national student protests occurred . . . and have never experienced an "undisrupted" academic year'. As lecturer, she felt responsible for the lives and learning of students subjected to being teargassed, shot at, and criminalised by the police. On the other hand, as an SCA she felt ill-informed on how to deal with the student protests and about strategies and circumvent campus disruptions. She described this as a critical incident during which she experienced personal conflict that emphasised her experiences and perceptions of academia as a non-appreciative and non-supportive, a 'care-less' (Herman et al., 2018) environment.

Integral to a 'care-full' environment is effective communication between staff, students, and management (Tronto, 1993). Participant One's narrative further illustrates the

challenges she faced as an SCA when she had to convene a course during the #FMF period and emphasises the importance of effective communication as a tool to allay anxiety and stress:

> Staff faced considerable uncertainty and stress with a resultant resistance to teaching and student interaction. Barriers I have had to navigate include a dearth of effective communication, which led to chaos and confusion … as there was a lag time in communication during this period, [we] were often left in the dark when management's plans changed daily (Participant 1).

The lack of perceived support from management during this turbulent time created a situation that left her feeling unsupported and deserted. In this seemingly 'care-less' situation she experienced confusion, conflict, mistrust, and uncertainty as she did not know where to pledge her allegiance:

> I was deeply affected by the student protests and grappled with the conflicting roles I played … I felt responsible to salvage the academic year and in doing so was seen by students and other academics as being 'against' the student movement … [I] found myself plagued by these issues and turning to management for guidance or debriefing opportunities, but finding none (Participant 1).

Although all participants reported the challenges of their transition into academia, they were essentially entering stage two of their transition and started referring to themselves as academics. Participant One reported her feelings of anxiety when 'having [my] identity as an academic being challenged'. Participant Three stated that she found it 'easier' to transition 'from an academic identity [back] to a professional identity.' Participant Two shared how she was not aware of available growth opportunities that would 'enable [me] to grow in [my] career as an academic'.

Participant Two further shared how she was grappling with extracting tacit teaching and learning knowledge and determining the 'rules of the game' while immersing herself in this new culture. She bemoaned the fact that she had to do this in the absence of collegial support and, more specifically, of departmental mentorship:

> On my appointment, there was no mentor to guide me through departmental procedures and protocols, no support for staff development and no advice on how to address student queries … I was not mentored … (Participant 2).

According to the literature, postgraduate courses and programmes in teaching and learning in HE are helpful during a period of transitioning (Boyd, 2010). Participant Two specifically mentioned her appreciation: 'workshops in education and leadership … enabled me to improve my teaching and leadership and gave me a wealth of insight on teaching and learning which I implemented in the classroom'. She also expressed her gratitude for the induction programme at her institution as it provided her with a number of necessary skills:

> to overcome the challenges regarding teaching strategies, styles and assessments I attended the Teaching and Development programme at [my institution] where [SCAs] were informed about these … (Participant 2).

For Participant Three, the challenge was different. Being employed as an academic, she anticipated having teaching responsibilities, but reported that 'the first challenge … started [when] I walked into my office space … I was employed as an academic but did

not engage in any teaching commitments nor the supervision of students'. In her case, uncertainty and lack of communication negatively affected her ability to fulfil her work requirements, which she experienced as extremely unfair and 'care-less':

> another challenge … was that my work responsibilities were not aligned with how my performance … would be assessed … teaching was one of the criteria … used to assess our performance … all we wanted … was … a fair assessment of our actual performance (Participant 3).

Such a 'care-less' environment coupled with a perceived lack of clarity about their identity could potentially impact on the SCAs' job satisfaction, motivation, effectiveness, and commitment.

Stage 3: identity redefined

During the last stage of transitioning into academia, SCAs should be comfortable with redefining themselves as academics by integrating their professional and academic identities. Key to such redefinition is individual agency supported by an enabling, 'care-full' environment. Construction of new identities is, however, fraught with difficulties. If a process of redefining does not happen, SCAs might decide to leave academia.

The three participants in this research each had a different journey and ended up at different destinations. Participants reported how they enacted agency within their environments, sometimes leading to redefinition of the self and other times not. One participant indicated she found strength and wisdom within herself through reflection: 'I have found value in reflecting on past experiences to extract lessons from it and to map out ripple effects … to identify leverage points to enhance success … ' (Participant 1). Her environment was however not experienced as 'care-full' and she left academia to become a consultant.

Participant Two reported how she enacted agency and 'learnt to persevere in the face of adversity' to become her own change:

> the challenges faced during the transition are real and there are times when one wants to give up. However, I realised that I can't change people. In order to make a difference, I must be the change by changing my mind set, engaging and persevering (Participant 2).

She also mentioned how she leveraged a lack of mentorship 'as an opportunity to identify persons within [and outside] the Department [to] assist me along my new journey as well as nurture myself'. The way she enacted individual agency, took control of her situation, became involved in the academic space, and redefined and accepted her new identity, could be reasons why she remained in academia.

It is unfortunate that Participant Three knew what she needed for successfully transitioning into academia, but did not experience an enabling environment to integrate her professional and academic identities and become an academic. She shared how 'exercising my agency by engaging head on with the issues that could not be changed … . grew my academic network beyond the department and formed collaborations outside of my department and the institution'. In the end, Participant Three decided to leave 'the counterfeit academic role I had occupied', and she took a professional position within the same institution. She felt strongly about the fact that it was easier to go back to being

a professional because the necessary conditions were present. When reflecting on her transition back into a professional position, she aptly summarised the desirable conditions: '[when] someone transitions from one place/unit/job to another, there is usually a period of change, renewal and acceptance. This transition period can be made easier if the right conditions are present ... an enabling environment, conducive work space and an induction programme.'

From the findings of this research it seems as if Participants One and Three did not experience an enabling environment at their institutions, although they did gain a lot from participating in the induction programmes and they did exercise their personal agency in certain instances. Participant Two, on the other hand, seems to have experienced a more enabling environment, participated in the institutional induction programme and exercised personal agency when necessary.

At this stage the questions that remain are whether agency, and if so 'how much of it', is enough to overcome a constraining environment, and what the implications of the findings are for educational developers when supporting SCAs. Due to the fact that Participants One and Three resigned from their academic positions, we as educational developers assume that the expectations of an enabling environment, when transitioning into academia, were not met.

In an attempt to rephrase and respond to the question posed by Sutherland (2017), asking 'why we should care about what SCAs care about' and to inform the practices of educational developers, this article explored the experiences of three SCAs transitioning from Health Professions into academia. Although small in scope, this study illuminates some of the challenges of SCAs in health sciences and attempts to make some suggestions as to how educational developers could create a 'care-full' environment for health professionals as they make a career change and 'start a new life' in academia.

In the next section, responses about potentially enabling aspects as shared by participants are related to the literature and brought to bear on our experience as educational developers.

How educational developers could potentially create an enabling environment for SCAs transitioning into academia

Two of the aims of educational development are the thriving of academics in their teaching role and the creation of 'care-full' spaces for individuals to flourish (Herman et al., 2018). In the same way that lecturers should take into account the prior learning and knowledge of students, educational developers should acknowledge and be responsive to the context, value, previous work experience, and professional identity of SCAs when offering educational development opportunities and facilitating their transition into academia. The cornerstone of supporting health care professionals as SCAs with their transition and integration into an academic environment should thus be an understanding of, and an effort to meet, their specific and unique needs.

We are reminded by Clegg (2003, p. 46) not to expect of SCAs 'to leave aspects of their identity at the door when engaging them in professional development activities', but to embrace their professional knowledge and background. In terms of the identity development of SCAs, this study strengthens the argument that educational development

activities should maximise the commitments, values, and sense of self-worth of SCAs. It is imperative that educational developers assist, engage, and communicate with SCAs more frequently during their journey into academia. This could create a platform for SCAs to express their fears and challenges to educational developers, who should be mindful of their needs and assist in creating a positive and enabling environment. Creating communities, also outside of their direct environment, such as the NATRC event described earlier, could go a long way in assisting SCAs on their journey into academia.

By normalising the transition experience, educational developers could encourage SCAs' sense of agency without the pressure to conform. Blackmore and Blackwell (2006, p. 380) call for an integrated and holistic approach that requires educational developers 'to work with the grain of preferred faculty self-identity', thus being mindful of and meeting SCAs where they are on their journey of redefining themselves and becoming academics.

In the context of this research, educational developers should recognise the presence and absence of care, thus distinguishing between 'care-full' and 'care-less' environments in order to develop an understanding of the three stages of identity development of SCAs. Geertsema and Bolander Laksov (2019) suggest that educational developers should take on a 'brokering role that not only respects but honours diverse academic identities across disciplines and cultures' and should support academics to turn the challenges in their own contexts into opportunities for change and development.

In an attempt to interpret the data and illuminate the role of educational developers in supporting SCAs' transition into academia, the next section attempts to contextualise support for SCAs using the three-stage model. Although generalising from this small narrative study would be unwise, reflecting on the findings can even so be valuable for educational developers.

Stage 1: creating 'care-full' environments

A university should create 'care-full' spaces where all academic staff can grow personally and professionally in order to serve their students and, ultimately, the wider society (Fitzmaurice, 2013). Sutherland and Taylor (2011, p. 183) remind us that all newly appointed academics usually 'find the first few years of their academic appointment confusing, anxiety inducing, and full of conflicting messages'. From this research, this seems true for SCAs as well. Tronto (1993) reminds educational developers to take the concerns and needs of others as the basis for our action, thus taking a 'care-full' approach to our work.

Milligan and Wiles (2010) describe 'care' as affirming someone's identity and self-worth whilst assuming a role that provides encouragement, personal attention, and communication. If teaching is identified as a caring activity, which requires one to be 'care-full' in order to create an environment where people feel valued, educational development activities should do the same for SCAs. Educational developers could therefore consider meeting and spending time with SCAs on a personal level. Creating such 'care-full' environments where SCAs would flourish and imagine a future career as a teacher is important for their successful transitioning into academia.

Stage 2: acknowledging the value of liminal spaces and CoPs

Educational developers should realise that SCAs who find themselves in the turmoil of the second stage of their identity transitioning process are making progress on their journey of becoming academics. Simmons et al. (2013, p. 10) describe how 'navigating among conflicting identities can lead into a troublesome but deeply reflective liminal space, prompting profound realizations and the reconstruction of … identities'. They further argue that 'this unsettled liminality is an inherent part of developing one's identity as an academic' (p. 10). By virtue of the positioning of educational developers, they usually have an understanding of the power dynamics in universities and can facilitate SCAs' resilience within this liminal space.

Such facilitation could potentially take place through integration into a CoP, setting up networking and mentorship relationships, and working alongside Departmental Heads. Wenger (1998) defines a CoP as a group of people organising themselves around a 'joint enterprise', 'mutual engagement', and 'shared repertoire of communal resources'. Collegial and institutional support and guidance as well as induction and orientation become non-negotiable and the responsibility of the group into which the SCA will be assimilating.

Identity and practice are deeply connected (Wenger, 1998) and SCAs should be given time and space to develop their teaching identities through sharing of tacit knowledge, conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship within a CoP. Although a CoP is invaluable for the transition of SCAs into academia and should be explicitly created for them to feel comfortable and learn from others, it is often absent in universities. It could potentially be beneficial for the transitioning of SCAs if teaching and learning induction programmes are redesigned so CoPs with a teaching and learning focus are deliberately established.

Another way of deliberately creating a CoP is through mentorship. Mentorship could enhance work resilience, influence career choices, and subsequently encourage staff retention. The value of colleagues' support for and encouragement of SCAs' motivation and personal growth in an act of care was also mentioned by one participant:

> supportive colleagues are the biggest enabler of my own sense of agency. They motivate one to try out new ideas and encourage one's personal growth … [to] develop … as an academic (Participant 1).

Stage 3: developing agency

SCAs themselves also have a responsibility to 'self-manage' (Smith & Boyd, 2012) in overcoming some of the complex challenges accompanying the transition from a professional identity to that of an academic, and they should be encouraged to take an active role in their own development. They should not isolate themselves during this journey from professional to academic. Using their agency in the process of redefining themselves as academics should be encouraged. To this end, educational developers, managers, and senior academics have to assist SCAs in their transition by making explicit

the 'rules of the game' and equip them to navigate and challenge institutional bureaucracy and managerialism.

All humans flourish when they feel cared for and academics are no different. Given the position of educational developers, they should also advocate on the institutional level for a culture where academia is seen as a career, and academics are valued and supported as humans with feelings and emotions. If we expect lecturers to care for their students, then they also need to be cared for and to care for themselves.

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Notes on contributors

Nicoline Herman is deputy director at Stellenbosch University's Centre for Teaching and Learning. Her research interests are educational leadership and the professional learning of academics for teaching. She has been employed in educational development for more than 20 years and holds a PhD in the field.

Maria Jose is a qualified medical doctor and public health specialist who consults for clinical trials, academia, and non-profit organisations. Her research interests relate to the application of choice modelling methods to healthcare labour market research. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Medicine & Surgery with a Master's degree in Public Health & Health Economics.

Misiwe Katiya is a senior lecturer at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. She has 15 years of professional staff development experience and coordinates the induction programme for new lecturers. Misiwe holds a PhD in Linguistics. Her interests include mentoring, professional development, research into language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and second language teaching.

Merlisa Kemp is a Diagnostic Ultrasound lecturer with a PhD in Radiography. She is coordinator of the BSc Diagnostic Ultrasound programme at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Her research interests are peripheral and extracranial vascular ultrasound imaging and multiple sclerosis.

Natalie le Roux is a Research Psychologist by training. She is currently the Manager: Research Support at the University of Cape Town's Research Support Hub.

Claudia Swart-Jansen van Vuuren is an educational advisor at Stellenbosch University's Centre for Teaching and Learning. She holds an MPhil in HE and was a lecturer for 14 years. Her research interest is in the professional learning of academics for teaching. Claudia previously convened the institutional induction programme for newly appointed academics.

Charmaine van der Merwe holds an MPhil in HE and is an educational advisor at Stellenbosch University's Centre for Teaching and Learning. She was a second-career academic herself when moving from being a critical care nurse into academia, and thereafter into educational development. Her research interest is in the professional development of educational developers.

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