The functioning of academic employees in a dynamic South African higher education environment

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Introduction: The higher education sector is experiencing changes in the profile of employees and stakeholders. Current employees are expected to function effectively and efficiently in institutions to achieve individual and organisational goals. The functioning aspect of the capability approach presents the opportunity to investigate how academic employees function in the current work environment. The study aimed to investigate the functioning of academic employees in the current work environment. Understanding how academic employees function in their current work environment provides the opportunity to develop relevant talent management practices to motivate, retain, support, develop, and lead academic employees.

Methods: A qualitative research approach and a critical realism perspective was utilised to explore social relations in the sample environment. Purposive sampling was employed to identify appropriate participants for the study. Nine online semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants.

Results: The findings of the study show that academic employees function effectively when they experience support and relationships at work as well as when autonomy and technology are available among various aspects of work. Talent management strategies require proactive reviewing to meet academic employees' needs to enhance performance.

Discussion: Human resource practitioners and leaders in the institution have the responsibility to explore the functioning of academics in their environment to understand how they can enhance their performance and develop and retain these employees to meet institutional goals. The study adds some insights to the current literature related to the functioning of academic employees using the capability approach. The institution can develop new mechanisms to enhance the performance of these employees in a dynamic environment through talent management practices.

KEYWORDS

academic employees, functioning, human resource and management practices, higher education, capability approach

Introduction

The focus of the study is on the functioning of academic employees in a South African higher education institution. Academic employees are faced with drastic changes in their daily work. These changes and demands affect how academics function in their work. The functioning of academics for the purpose of this study is adopted from Sen's capability approach. Functioning's refers to doing and achieving valuable aspects of work (Nambiar, 2013). It is essential for academic employees to function effectively and efficiently in their roles to achieve the goals of their institutions and those

of the Department of Higher Education. Academics are also required to function at their highest levels to achieve what they value.

Higher education focuses on the sharing and imparting of knowledge to the recipients and society at large. The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) aims to develop capable, well-educated citizens that can sustain and diversify the South African economy to meet the development objectives of the country.[1] The department aims to improve quality and efficiency in the system. To achieve this, highly capable employees are essential in the academic environment.

Literature review

Current South African higher education environment

The South African higher education environment consists of 26 public universities and 131 private institutions of higher learning with a combined total of 1,283,890 enrolled students in 2019 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021) in comparison to the United Kingdom (UK) where 2,341,425 students were enrolled in higher education institutions for the period 2017–2018 (Universities UK, 2019). The latest South African statistics indicate that about 57,507 academic employees are involved in teaching and research (National Research Foundation, 2018). These statistics indicated the imbalance between the number of enrolled students and academic employees. The education department is taking action to address this imbalance through various programmes, such as the New Generation of Academics Programmes (nGAP), the Staffing South Africa's Universities Development Programme (SSAU-DP), the Existing Academics Capacity Enhancement Programme (EACP) and the Supplementary Staff Employment Programme (SSEP). Not only do these programmes aim to address the imbalance, but they also aim to develop future generations of academics and build staff capacity (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). Developing staff capability is imperative in an environment that has historically been challenged with issues of transformation from both a staffing and student perspective.

Beyond these issues, more diversified students and staff are entering the higher education landscape thus, indicating that new ways and methods of working, learning, and research are necessary.

Technology continuously has an effect on how academics function in their work. Technology is meant to improve the working conditions, methods, and processes involved in delivering key results (Burgess and Connell, 2020). The disruption that is brought by technology is mostly seen in two perspectives. The first view is that it brings about unemployment as work becomes automated. The other is that it is necessary to move forward with the digital age where employees have to create value through technology (Frey and Osborne, 2017; Schwab, 2017). Based on the above, academic employees are then naturally tasked to be able to perform optimally using technology, therefore the updating of skills, knowledge, and resources becomes continuous to keep abreast of the new developments and innovations. Academic employees must use technology in their teaching and learning for the

development of self, students, research, society, and business in general (Bates, 2015).

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has also influenced how the sector and those involved in it function. As normal operations were interrupted by the pandemic institutions, staff and students had to depend on technology for learning to continue. Institutions are now challenged by many factors in terms of which technology to invest in various platforms that are available, and which would be best for their teaching, research, and long-term usage for education (Rosenbusch, 2020). Robust changes and improvements in technology essentially mean that employees have to update their skills to meet all these developments (McWhorter and Bennett, 2014; Parry and Battista, 2019). Employee capabilities must be nurtured for them to be able to meet the dynamic demands of the organisation. Therefore, it is important to realise all these opportunities in the work environment and to develop employees to allow them to function optimally. The question then arises: How do academics function in their roles in a dynamic higher education environment? This paper aims to address the above issue in the current context.

Functioning of academics.

Sen's capability approach is centred on social justice – a good society where individuals can achieve their life plans (Sen, 1999). The capability approach further states that these individuals should be enabled to achieve these plans in specific domains (work/life in general). The normative prescription here is that individuals have options to achieve that which they value (Sen, 1992). Many of these achievements that individuals value are seen as functionings. Functionings refers to the individual.

values that are attained from the states of "being and doing" (Van der Klink et al., 2016). Functionings are therefore real opportunities that yield achievements of that which is valued (Sen, 2010). The role of academic employees is often directed to three operational functions, which are teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. Teaching and learning involve the development of teaching content, class time and self-development, whilst research is focused on supervision of postgraduate students and publishing research material in relevant accredited research journals. Community engagement is an integral part of academic work as social development and cohesion are some of the core pillars of academic institutions. Understanding the functioning of academics in the realm in which they operate, guides us in gathering the necessary knowledge of what is expected of them and how that is related to what academic employees value and the opportunities that are available to them to achieve their objectives.

Understanding the functioning of academic employees is central to providing the best metric for interpersonal evaluations highlighting the fact that the "functionings" are "doings" (Mitchell et al., 2006). The "doings" with which academics are busy have to be understood at an individual level to conceptualise the things that are important for them in doing their jobs. Academic roles in South Africa are characterised by teaching, learning, research, and community engagement. Beyond these, academics are required to have qualifications applicable to their level of reporting (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). Performing effectively across the scope of practice requires specific capabilities of the employed academic members. It is therefore imperative that the resources to perform are provided by institutions and employers alike (Mooken and Sugden, 2014).

Resources range from physical, teaching and learning equipment; wellness and safety; human capacity; and intellectual resources (Madikizela-Madiya, 2021). Provided that these resources are present in

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most cases, individual differences still play a major role in the performance of academics as people value different things. Thus, two people can have the same resources and still achieve completely different results (Mooken and Sugden, 2014). It is important to note that resources are not the only variable to achieving high performance as there are different variables to consider such as individual preferences, lifestyle, motivation, salary, work stress, and work method that might affect the performance of employees (Albadi et al., 2017).

Previous studies have linked high performance of academic employees to work engagement and job satisfaction (Amarathunga, 2018). In relation to this study, this indicates that exploring the functioning of academics is relevant as it explores other dimensions that influence academic employees in their work environment. Academic staff members are not only challenged by their specific work demands but also by their managers and colleagues, in addition to human resource practices in general. Managers and employees should have a clear understanding in the employment relationship of what is expected.

from the employees and what employees value in their job (Aboramadan et al., 2020). Establishing these expectations is mutually beneficial for all stakeholders.

Human resource management practices in academia

In academia human resource practices are vital for the performance of the organisation, departments, and employees alike. Managers are mandated to implement these practices in their departments that ultimately shape the work relationships that employees have with their managers and their colleagues in the organisation. Human resource practices are typically concerned with the attraction, recruitment, development, and retention of employees (Tolstyakova and Batyrova, 2020). Strategic human resource management indicates that even with the changing world of work, human capital remains important in achieving organisational goals (Hasani and Sheikesmeili, 2016). Developing employees ensures that institutions can meet various targets in a multifaceted environment (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2007).

However, it is important to reflect on the management of human resources as a relationship between what the organisation values and what the employees value, such as rewards, motivation, support, work-life balance, and personal preferences (Johari et al., 2018; Poisat et al., 2018). Previous studies indicate that an employee's preferences in terms of rewards, development, and management styles affect the employee's intention to stay or leave the organisation. Therefore, human resource practices should be able to respond to these factors in a flexible and quick manner (Lamba and Choudhary, 2013), thus, ensuring that practices are relevant and can keep up with the demands of the employees in an ever- changing world of work. Universities typically favour flexible work environments for academic employees, which enables academics to participate in various activities within and outside institutions (Oba, 2005). The doings and beings of academic staff ensure that these employees are not only competent in what they do but that they are also valued by their institutions.

Values are not only intrinsic to employees. The employees also have a desire to be shown that they are valued by their employers. Human resource professionals need strategies and practices that can meet this need through human resource strategy and planning (Vicencio, 2021). Diverse staff complements and the continuous onslaught of technology, among various other aspects, are making it more challenging for human resource professionals to meet some of these challenges as different employees value different beings and doings (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Podgorodnichenko et al., 2020). Exploring the functioning of academics based on Sen's capability approach permits the study to develop new methods of practice for human resource professionals and departments in higher education institutions. Limited studies exist that investigate the functioning of academics as a distinct phenomenon of the capability approach (Mitra, 2006). Investigating the functioning of academics does not only enhance the research related to academics but also focuses on resolving major human resources challenges faced by academic institutions.

Research purpose and objectives

The study focuses on investigating the functioning of academics in the current higher education environment. Functionings of academic employees under the capability approach are explored to understand what they value and what kind of activities they are involved in to achieve that which they value.

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative research approach guides the study to achieve its objective. Rich data were collected using qualitative approaches and methods. Qualitative research can be defined as an approach that is useful in gathering people's experiences in detail through various research mechanisms (Hennink et al., 2020). To gather more of an understanding of how academics function a critical realist paradigm was used in the study. Critical realism examines social relations to gather a clear understanding of those specific situations and recommends solutions to the challenges faced in the system by the stakeholders (Fletcher, 2017). Ontological assumptions in critical realism provide researchers with the opportunity to understand the reality of the same environment from various participants that have experienced it (Mingers, 2006). The epistemological assumption of critical realism is that it fosters an opportunity to understand the participants' knowledge of their environment by seeking explanations and meaning of their reality (Wynn Jr and Williams, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants, therefore allowing the researcher to gain understanding from the participants' point of view.

Research participants and sampling methods

Participants in the study were recruited through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the study and gaining an in-depth understanding of the population being studied (Patton, 2002; Hennink et al., 2020). Participant characteristics included that they are employed in the specific tertiary institution as academic staff lecturing in different subject fields. Academic employees from other institutions were excluded from the study. Gatekeeper permission allowed the researcher to recruit participants. Participants were recruited through marketing the research study on the institution's website and through the

institutions bulk email system. Respondents completed the informed consent form and were subsequently contacted to schedule the online interview. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to ask questions and discuss aspects appropriate to the study. Data saturation was reached at nine participants ($n = 9$) as they shared experiences and relevant knowledge about the study.

Data collection

Data for the study was collected from the sampled participants through online semi-structured interviews. Questions relevant to the functioning of academics were used in this regard. Where applicable, the data were audio and video recorded after each participant's consent had been obtained. The following are examples of the interview questions used to conceptualise the functioning of academic employees. These semi-structured interview question(s) were asked to examine the functioning of academics.

Research procedure

The research study involved using online platforms to conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants. Nine participants were interviewed to collect the necessary data focusing on the functioning of academic employees. All the data were stored on password encrypted device platforms to ensure safety and avoid a data breach. Data were then transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti 9 software. Research participants were made aware of all the steps that the research would follow and were allowed to discuss any research-related issues with the researcher to ensure that ethical conduct was adhered to.

Data analysis

Atlas.ti 9 software was used to analyse the transcribed data. The data were categorised into codes, quotation content and code group to give a better understanding of the data for analysis. For the data to be analysed it was first coded then followed a thematic analysis approach (Friese, 2021). Descriptive codes attached to the transcribed texts conceptualise the primary idea of the text (Saldana, 2010). The thematic analysis allows the researcher the scope to understand the data better through familiarisation and to categorise the data to develop themes (Grbich, 2013). The themes and codes generated during this process allow an understanding of the meaning behind the transcribed text and the establishment of links between established themes (Willig, 2014). The analysis resulted in 10 main codes linked to the functioning of academic employees.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained to interview employees in the institution and approval for the research was obtained from the relevant ethics committee. Informed consent to audio/video record participants was obtained before the interviews, and participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation during the interview. All the recorded data is stored on password encrypted devices to ensure the safety, anonymity, and confidentiality of the participants. Participants

were informed of the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. The researcher also attended all relevant ethics training to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner.

Results

The data were obtained from nine participants that were involved in the study that focused specifically on the functioning of academics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the following results contextualise the findings from the thematic analysis. Ten codes were obtained from the analysis, the codes are represented in the code cloud in Figure 1.

The code cloud above indicates the intensity of which codes were prevalent in the functioning of academics. Codes such as *support, relationships, autonomy, technology, achieving goals, administrative skills, appreciation, motivation, work requirements, and resources* are essential in the functioning of academics. Table 1 represents some of the code intercepts that were obtained from participants through transcription.

A detailed analysis of the results follows in this section. Graph 1 is a visual representation of the factors indicated by the data that influence how academics function in their work. *Support* is the leading factor that influences how academics function, followed by relationships that employees have at work with their colleagues and managers. *Autonomy* and *technology* also have a great influence on how academics function in their work. *Achieving goals* is important to academics as it is the fourth recurring code based on the analysis. *Administrative skills* and *appreciation* of employees are important for the functioning of these specific employees as they are the fifth influential factors, whilst *motivation*, resources and work requirements have the least influence on the functioning of academics based on this specific analysis (Table 2; Figure 2).

Discussion

The results of the study indicate various aspects that influence how academics function in the work environment. Academic employees are influenced by these factors in terms of how they function in their roles. It is important to understand these influential aspects in terms of how academics function as this influences their performance and ultimately on how they perceive their roles. The main findings of the study indicate that support, relationships, autonomy, and technology are highly influential in the functioning of academics in the institution.
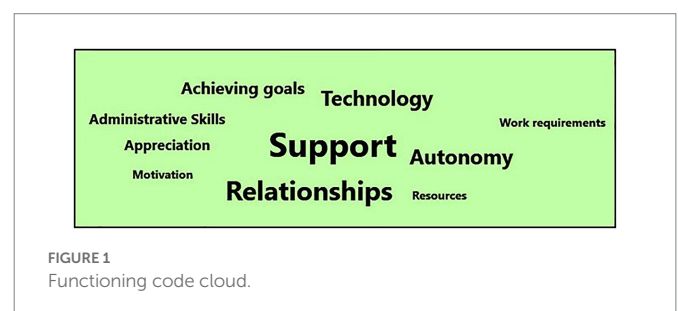

FIGURE 1
Functioning code cloud.

TABLE 1 Interview protocol for functioning of academics.

Question 1	What influences how you function in your current job?
Question 2	What do you value most in your work? a. Why is it important for you to achieve this in your work?
Question 3	Which opportunities are you offered to achieve this? (This being what the participant has stated that they value in their work)
Question 4	To what extent do you realise this?

Support

Support has been found to be the most recurring code in the findings of the study. Support from management, colleagues, processes, and the overall institution was seen as valuable by the participants. The following are examples of participants' comments "*So I think having the support structure within the institution has a big influence*"; "*I also find that you know having directors and line managers who are willing to work with you to solve problems and stuff during task agreement, to having that support has been helpful. Then yes, research support is very important.*" Support is important for the staff members to achieve their personal and career goals in the academic environment. Having the necessary support enables these employees to perform better and reduces workplace stress (Kenny and Fluck, 2014). The role of management in supporting these employees should be focused on interventions that meet the goals of both the organisation and those of its employees to create a culture of collaboration where each stakeholder is valued (Passmore, 2019). In general, the environment in which academic employees function should support the core role of academics (teaching, learning, and research) as well as their goals. Previous studies have found that a supportive environment is beneficial for the mental health of employees (Ohadomere and Ogamba, 2020). Offering academic employees the necessary support will ensure that human resource practices are upheld as the attraction, development, and retention of these employees is increased thereby reducing the cost of turnover (Chaacha and Botha, 2021).

Relationships

In general, employees spend 8 h at work. With so much time spent at work, the relationships that these employees have with their colleagues is important for their performance. Researchers have found that social relations at work enhance job satisfaction, increase work performance, and reduce intention to leave (Shellenbarger, 2000; Levy, 2003; Amjad et al., 2015). Employees that experience positive relationships at work are more inclined to trust their managers and their colleagues thus increasing trust between employees and managers (Krot and Lewicka, 2012). Experiencing positive relationships at work reflects that when employees enjoy their work environment achieving work tasks and personal goals is seen to reduce the negative effects that an employee would experience in a work environment (Krot and Lew).

The following is an example of what some of the views of participants in the study regarding the importance of relationships at work. "*Also, the relationship I have with my colleagues, I believe that if it wasn't for the relationship, I have with my colleagues despite us having arguments or disagreements here and there, I would not still be in this job.*

It would have made it ten times harder than it is." The findings of the study indicate that having social and professional relationships at work enhances the performance and intention to stay of employees in their current work environments. Therefore, institutions must ensure that the relationships that employees experience at work are such that they can be valued as this affects several factors – as highlighted previously.

Autonomy

Previous studies indicate that academic employees rank autonomy very high in their working life (Nguyen et al., 2014). Autonomy for academic employees is described as the employee's freedom to exercise his/her ability free from leadership control to act independently in relation to the environment (Enders et al., 2013). Leadership of the employee is often seen to shape the level of autonomy that academic employees are likely to experience in their work environment (Puaca, 2021). Academic employees value autonomy for various reasons, but primarily the employees value what having the autonomy signifies for them and their careers. The study found that participants in the study valued their autonomy as they were able to grow and explore the options that having autonomy presents to them in their work environments.

> "*I value autonomy because I like being independent. I feel like I grow more when I'm able to do things on my own as opposed to somebody constantly telling me 'this is what you need to do'.*"

> "*Autonomy. I value autonomy because before I started working here, I used to work for a company where you had to account for everything that you did with somebody telling you what to do. So, when I got here, I valued I found myself valuing autonomy.*"

Technology

Technology has certainly influenced the world of work and how employees experience their work environments. Academic employees have not been spared from the impact of technology in their work environments. Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions to use new technology and for employees to upskill themselves to use this new technology (Zalat et al., 2021).

Employees in the study value the role that technology has played during the pandemic as they are able to communicate effectively, learn new skills, and use other aspects of technology.

> "*… some more I think important than others especially with the technology than development about that. With our students that we permanently communicate now electronically with all my colleagues, all these things. So, for the future you must be able to learn and willing to learn all these new skills and things specially about technology.*"

The narrative clearly indicates that employees are willing to learn new skills related to technology and that they acknowledge the role that technology fulfils in their overall work in the sector. "*You need to also familiarize yourself with technology, as you also have seen that the way in which classes are conducted has evolved*" Previous studies also emphasised the positive effect that technology has on the quality of education (Bhardwaj et al., 2015). Therefore, the functioning of

TABLE 2 Code intercepts.

Code	Participant identification	Intercept
Achieving goals	Participant 1	Personal goals are aligned with kind-of the university's goals, right.
	Participant 4	What I value is success achieving goals.
	Participant 19	Definitely, the sense of accomplishments and I can definitely say the sense of accomplishment feels different depending on what part or what aspect within my work I am doing.
Administrative skills	Participant 1	And then there are also certain skills and abilities for instance, I guess, once again I can only speak from where I am. I've had to create many modules from nothing and definitely knowing how those things work, knowing where to go to find out, those are things that have been very, very necessary for me to figure out when I started at the university.
	Participant 19	Definitely administrative capabilities. I know that it is more of a practical application and a skill that can be learnt rather than what it is an inherent skill, but it's also an important skill to have.
	Participant 19	You definitely need have to have administrative skills.
Appreciation	Participant 18	But appreciation, especially for example again, "thank you for being willing to do at that time of night, still you are doing this."
	Participant 18	Yes, and also the students. If they once in a while just send me an email and say "thank you for your support" or you know that. That is, I think that is very important.
	Participant 5	"what you were telling us, what you were teaching us, what you were giving us at that time is actually what I needed for me to succeed in my career to progress in life also"
Autonomy	Participant 1	And also, the fact that we have at least within our school a lot of academic freedom, you know. So, I often think about the difference between teaching high school which is where I was previously. So, previously I taught at an IEB school and teaching at the university, and I think one of the things that I really value is the amount of academic freedom we have in deciding how we are carving out our career path.
	Participant 1	I think a part of it is that we do so much admin because to some extent with that freedom that we have right, with great power comes great responsibility, but the amount of academic freedom we have, we have to constantly prove that we are doing enough to ensure quality.
	Participant 3	Autonomy. I value autonomy because before I started working here, I used to work for a company where you had to account for everything that you did with somebody telling
		you what to do. So, when I got here, I valued I found myself valuing autonomy.
Motivation	Participant 4	Alright. First, personally, I think there's internal things. It's about motivation, it's about drive, it's about knowledge.
	Participant 4	And if you do not really have a drive or a motivation really to achieve it, you may battle to get where you want to be.
Relationships	Participant 1	I also think on a more like micro level, the relationship between you and your direct managers so for instance for me with the School Director and the Research Director or with our Subject Group Coordinator, etc. those relationships are very important because it means if that relationship is strong it means that you can negotiate in a way that helps you to achieve your goal.
	Participant 3	Also, the relationship I have with my colleagues, I believe that if it wasn't for the relationship I have with my colleagues despite us having arguments or disagreements here and there, I would not still be in this job. It would have made it ten times harder than it is.
	Participant 4	And colleagues and collaboration with them on less collaboration.
Resources	Participant 5	Also having resources is I think it's the most relevant because you can have the passion but if you do not have the resources then it's a challenge on its own.
	Participant 5	So, I'll say the main thing it's having the resources.

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Code	Participant identification	Intercept
Support	Participant 1	Having for instance research support at the university has been very important in actually meeting those parts of my task agreement.
	Participant 4	Well, I would say that some of the opportunities at this stage personally for me is my own research, there's funding available, there's opportunities to do that although as a Director I get less time to really pursue my research career in that sense, but also then opportunities to achieve with colleagues and develop my entity to get to a higher level.
	Participant 10	The support I get from our support team, our systems, admin systems, sometimes there are things that we do not know as lecturers that they are more conversant with. So, it's always great to get that kind of information from them. It helps us function better.
Technology	Participant 4	"That can influence me, and I have to develop some of it still for example, in my case technology maybe"
	Participant 4	Ability from computer using computer and technology is also something which I need to do."
	Participant 4	Some more I think important than others especially with the technology than development about that. With our students that we permanently communicate now electronically with all my colleagues, all these things. So, for the future you must be able to learn and willing to learn all these new skills and things specially about technology.
Work requirements	Participant 4	University policies and colleagues and collaboration with them on less collaboration.
	Participant 20	"my line managers, my task agreement and requirements also influences, my personal development plan influences how I function. So, it's all the expectations and the requirements, the job specification and description also influence how I function, and then also like I said my qualifications and experience influence"

FIGURE 2
Functioning codes.
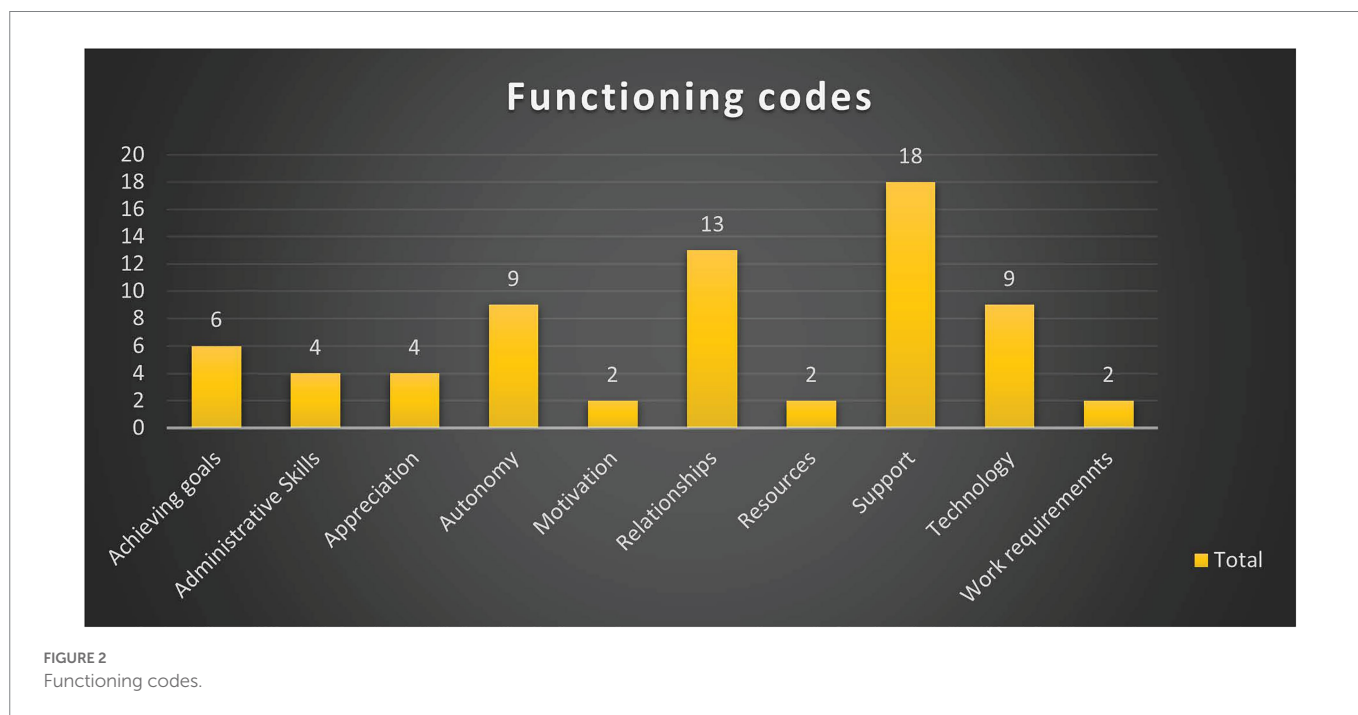
academic employees in a highly technological environment provides the opportunity for growth for employees, students, and the institution.

Achieving goals and motivation

Goal achievement is defined as striving for mastery and performance goals through outstanding demonstration of significant competence (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Achieving goals is strongly linked with explaining employee behaviour in organisational settings (Van Yperen et al., 2014). Goal setting is associated with motivation as it translates to persuading employees to participate in work tasks (Janke and Dickhäuser, 2018). Employees are found to value achieving goals and motivation is important for achieving these goals. Employees that are motivated and driven to achieve goals can enhance their performance and that of the team. Leaders have to create environments where employees are motivated to achieve their goals (Ouakouak et al., 2020). Intrinsic motivation of employees also increases the probability

of employees to achieve their goals (Van Rensburg and Rothmann, 2020). Participants in the study mentioned the following:

> *"Definitely the sense of accomplishments and I can definitely say the sense of accomplishment feels different depending on what part or what aspect within my work I am doing."*

> *"And if you don't really have a drive or a motivation really to achieve it, you may battle to get where you want to be."*

The findings indicate that employees value different aspect of achieving their goals in the work environment as there is specific meaning attached to each accomplishment. Motivation is seen as essential to move forward in the career of an academic employee.

Administrative skills, work requirements, and resources.

Academic employees are tasked with teaching, learning, and research activities as part of their role. These core functions require these employees to be proficient regarding policies, processes, and methods for delivering quality service to the institution and all relevant stakeholders (Mduwile and Komariah, 2021). Administration entails the process of being to organise, plan, and use resource to achieve outcomes (Saithong, 2007). Administrative skills therefore require the ability to use knowledge and abilities efficiently in their roles (Sura and Darbavasu, 2019). Academic employees use these skills in class preparation, examinations, presentations, and generally being able to conduct certain work tasks. Work requirements of academic employees have to be met and the link between these skills and these work requirements enhance the performance of staff members. It is worth noting that completing works tasks requires resources to perform daily activities. Increasing students loads and administrative processes are some of the challenges that add to the workload of academic staff members (Theron et al., 2014). Participants in the study were not explicit regarding specifically which resources they referred to. However, in terms of the current context, such resources could include software, hardware, physical structures, organisational resources *(those provided by the institution)*, personal resources *(ability to perform in the environment)*, and social resources (*support from other sources*; Naidoo-Chetty and du Plessis, 2021). The following remarks by participants support what previous researchers found regarding administrative skills, work requirements, and resources that influence the functioning of academic employees.

> *"Definitely administrative capabilities. I know that it is more of a practical application and a skill that can be learnt rather than what it is an inherent skill, but it's also an important skill to have."*

> *"… My line managers, my task agreement and requirements also influences, my personal development plan influences how I function. So, it's all the expectations and the requirements, the job specification and description also influences how I function, and then also like I said my qualifications and experience influence."*

> *"So, I'll say the main thing it's having the resources."*

Appreciation

The findings of the study indicate that employees value being appreciated in their work environment. The concept of appreciation is closely related to recognition. Appreciation is seen as an acknowledgement of the value that one contributes. It can be the actual acknowledgement of an act or an event and the resultant positive emotions from such an acknowledgement (Adler and Fagley, 2005). This is in line with what the study found in terms of the difference in how employees experience appreciation as some viewed salaries as a token of appreciation, while others considered acknowledgement as an expression of gratitude ("word of thanks") from colleagues, managers, and students alike. These gestures of appreciation are important as they enhance the work environment in which employees function. They also assist in developing social bonds, increase individual performance and passion, and promote teamwork (Fagley and Adler, 2012). The following are different views regarding recognition expressed by some of the participants.

> *"… is salary for one."*

> *"Yes, and also the students. If they once in a while just send me an email and say "thank you for your support" or you know that. That is, I think that is very important."*

Practical implications

The findings of the study indicate that support is one of the most valuable aspects that influence how academic employees experience functioning in the work environments. The implication for the institution is that employees require various forms of support to ensure that they meet their job requirements, perform effectively, and remain in the institution. The functioning of academic employees is also influenced by the work relationships that employees have, the autonomy that they experience, the technology available, and their ability to achieve goals. Other aspects that influence their functioning include administrative skills, work requirements, resources, and appreciation. The findings indicate that work environment experiences are shaped by various factors. However, the leaders and managers of these employees have a responsibility to ensure that employees experience a positive work environment that enable employees to work effectively.

Employees seek relationships at work that can enhance their work experience. The institution must create a climate that encourages social interaction to promote collegial and leadership support. Institutional policies and practices must reflect the autonomous nature that is typically associated with an academic position to allow employees the academic freedom that they seek in terms of their role and approach to teaching, learning, research, and community engagement. The rate and use of technology in higher education has increased, technological resources, staff development opportunities for new skills to improve the quality of education being delivered. The above point is consistent with academics valuing meeting work requirements and achieving goals. Receiving appreciation from various sources reassures academic employees that they are doing well in their roles. Financial rewards and recognition from leaders, colleagues, students, and other stakeholders influence this functioning experience. Institutions must be flexible to ensure that recognition is given at all levels, in different forms, and for a variety of activities. Employees must be motivated to achieve their goals and to complete their tasks.

Talent management practices require constant review to meet some of the demands from academic employees and to adapt to the

dynamic world of work within which academics function. Continuous employee and leadership development is required to safeguard the quality of the services offered, limit the intention to leave of employees, ensure the well-being of employees, and improve institutional performance.

Limitations and recommendations

As the study is restricted to only one South African higher education institution, the applicability to other higher education institutions is consequently limited. Data collection interviews were conducted online. However, some participants experienced network issues which made it difficult to establish rapport with them. With the study only focusing on the functioning aspect of the capability approach literature was limited, and it was difficult to conceptualise some of the concepts in the study. This also affected the data collected as it only focused on the functioning aspect of the capability approach.

It is recommended that future research include other higher education institutions to gather richer data as experiences differ from individual to organisational level. Another recommendation is that, where possible, face-to-face interviews be conducted in the future to limit the inconveniences of technology. It is recommended that a training program focusing on the development of functioning competencies of academic employees be implemented to improve aspects such as support, relationships, autonomy, technology, administrative skills, appreciation, motivation, work requirements and resources in higher education. Future research can also include the broader aspects of the capability approach in similar studies. The inclusion of other higher education institutions will allow the exploration of other research methods and approaches to such a study.

Conclusion

The objective of the study was to investigate the functioning of academic employees in the current higher education environment. The functioning of academic employees is influenced by different aspects, such as support, relationships at work, autonomy, and technology among other factors. The findings of the study represent the experiences of academic employees in a dynamic environment, therefore highlighting the link between the experiences of these employees. Employees seeking support require meaningful relationships at work. They need to be allowed to perform their jobs in a manner that does not limit them with bureaucracy. Resources should be available for them to do their jobs effectively. The development of these employees is crucial to keep up with all the changes in the world of work and the higher education sector. Employees expressed a need to be appreciated and motivated, which

again emphasises the importance for human resource management practitioners and leaders in the institution to develop practices that can attract, retain, develop, and reward employees. Employees value these considerations as they influence their work experience and the views that they hold about themselves, their colleagues and leaders, other stakeholders, and the institution in general. Leaders, human resource management practitioners, and managers at academic institutions must consider these aspects when planning and evaluating strategic imperatives that will be delivered at an operational level by academic employees at these institutions. Positive work environments can enhance the performance of employees to contribute to the achievement of strategic goals.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the North-West University in South Africa. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

TC is the main researcher for the study. EO is the supervisor in the study. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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