

# Female lecturers' academic career development: A case of speech-language pathology and audiology

**Author:**Musa Makhoba<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Audiology,  
Faculty of Health Sciences,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
Durban, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Musa Makhoba,  
makhobamu@ukzn.ac.za

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**Background:** Academic career development (ACD) in the context of work intensification in speech-language pathology and audiology (SLP-A) academia has received limited attention in recent years. Higher education institutions, such as the University of Interest (UoI), provide support to developing academics. Yet, little is known about how female academics experience accessing ACD while simultaneously trying to cope with the demands of academic work intensification. The impact of ACD on work–life balance (WLB) is also unknown for SLP-A academics.

**Objectives:** This study explores the experiences of ACD for female SLP-A academics at a South African university and the related impact on WLB.

**Methods:** Eight purposively sampled SLP-A academics from the UoI participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews within a hermeneutic phenomenological design. The data generated were analysed thematically.

**Results:** The UoI makes ACD support available to staff, with female academics experiencing more opportunities than their male counterparts. However, access to available ACD support was restricted by time constraints and a counterculture within the SLP-A disciplines. Work intensification further restricted ACD and led to poor WLB, with social life being compromised.

**Conclusion:** There is a need to explore means to optimise the flow and accessibility of ACD opportunities from university leadership to the discipline level for female academics, with minimal interference from the disciplines. A stronger policy position to promote improved WLB is necessary.

**Contribution:** This study provides a basis for discussing policy shifts concerning work intensification while supporting ACD and minimising the negative impact on WLB, particularly for developing female academics.

**Keywords:** academic career development; work intensification; speech-language-pathology and audiology; female academics; early career academics; developing academics; higher educations.

## Introduction

Academic career development (ACD) is scantily covered in the literature (Zacher et al., 2019), particularly in the fields of speech-language pathology and audiology (SPL-A), in the context of work intensification. Due to the open nature of the concepts used in this article, conceptual clarity is necessary. In this article, ACD is described as the development in the areas of research (and related supervision), teaching and academic administration (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981). A female academic is a female individual involved in the aforementioned areas of academia. Work intensification entails excessive pressure from each of the different core job demands within a limited timeframe to prepare for each (Beck, 2017). Work–life (im)balance (WLB) refers to the relationship between energy, time and resources invested into work compared with social life (Fazal et al., 2019). This article presents how the female SLP-A academics experience ACD and highlights its relationship to WLB. It then proposes the necessary improvements towards optimising ACD while minimising its negative impact on WLB.

The focus of the study is on female academics for multiple reasons. Female academic representation is increasing in the South African higher education (HE) sector, including

**Note:** Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article as Online Appendix 1.

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the health sciences disciplines, which have become more racially, gender and socioeconomically inclusive over the past few decades (CHE, 2025; DHET, 2018; Karishma et al., 2024; Zulu, 2020). Yet, academia remains male dominated (Picardi, 2019). Female academics typically experience exploitation of their work to the benefit of their male counterparts (Angervall et al., 2015). Male academics often occupy the first author position in many of their works with female colleagues, as they are favoured by research publication politics (West et al., 2013). Interestingly, the uniquely female-dominated SLP-A disciplines present an outlier to the status quo, as one study reports that women in these fields are favoured by publication practices (Meier et al., 2025). However, it remains unclear whether academics in SLP-A disciplines experience ACD as favourably or if they also face the typical challenges in advancing their careers that female academics in male-dominated disciplines encounter.

Female academics are often assigned roles that are incongruent with their ACD goals, particularly in relation to achieving professorship or senior academic leadership, such as increased undergraduate teaching and related administrative responsibilities (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019). Those with full professorships remain underrepresented globally, a situation that is particularly pronounced in the sub-Saharan African context (Alfano et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2023). Even with a professorship status, female academics often don't receive the deserved credit in academia, which is worse in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, where the gender bias is thriving, and slows down their career progression (Ross et al., 2022; Uysal & Erbilien, 2025).

Academics experience excessive pressure from the recent wave of academic work intensification, which has been exacerbated by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in recent years and other challenges, such as the increasing expectation of career progression (Mula-Falcón et al., 2021; Okeke-Uzodike & Gamede, 2021). Integrating into academia can be demanding in general, and disproportionately more strenuous for female individuals. Female academics often have to sacrifice their social responsibilities, including partial neglect of familial responsibilities such as motherly and wifely duties, while pursuing excellence in teaching, research and related supervising (Mula-Falcón et al., 2021).

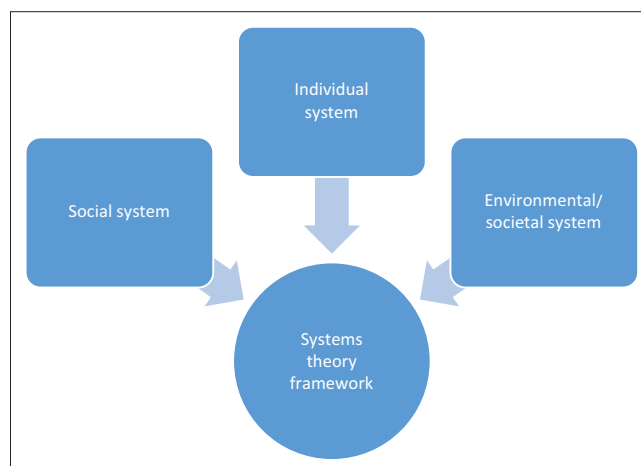
Female academics face an additional challenge of seeking mentorship from male counterparts due to the underrepresentation of senior female academics in this role in gender-biased higher education institutions (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023). Thus, male academics generally remain in a position of hegemonic superiority (Picardi, 2019). Hence, there is a need to understand the ACD trajectories of female academics, particularly the challenges they face in contexts that have not received sufficient attention, such as the SLP-A disciplines in South African higher education institutions, such as the UoI.

Overall, the literature reviewed above demonstrated some of the challenges female academics face, which may negatively affect their ACD journey. However, prior to the current study, it was not known if the same challenges are experienced in female-dominated fields such as SLP-A (Du Plessis, 2018; Litosseliti & Leadbeater, 2013). This article addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the female SLP-A's ACD experiences. The findings should inform decisions about policies geared towards academic promotions, career-pathing and development for female academics. Furthermore, the findings should inform the leadership and senior staff of SLP-A and contextually similar disciplines about aspects of ACD that relatively junior staff require assistance with.

## Theoretical framework: The systems theory framework

The systems theory framework (STF) (Figure 1) provided theoretical guidance for exploring the topic of interest. According to McMahon and Patton (2018), experiences can be explored across three systems, including individual, social and environmental. An *individual system* consists of elements of 'being' such as age, gender, epistemic worldview and implicit values. The *social system* encompasses the people surrounding the person of interest, and the person positions themselves in relation to these individuals. Lastly, an *environmental-societal system* encompasses factors that influence one's socio-environmental status, including their economic status and the political context.

The STF was established in the early 1990s (1992) as a framework to analyse career and related decision-making. It remains in use to date, predominantly to frame perspectives on career development, both within and outside academia (Lennox, 2024; Patton & McMahon, 2015). For instance, in a recent study, Lennox (2024) explored the career drivers of art students in the United Kingdom, using the same framework. Magnano et al. (2022) were guided by the same framework when exploring career development,



Source: Adapted from McMahon, M., & Patton, W. (2018). Systemic thinking in career development theory: Contributions of the systems theory framework. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 46, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2018.1428941>

**FIGURE 1:** Graphic depiction of the systems theory framework, as envisaged by the authors.

needs and influences in the experiences of migrants in Europe. Having been used in recent studies with similar interests, the STF was deemed an ideal theoretical lens for exploring the current study.

Through the STF lens, the experiences of female SPL-A academics with ACD were explored from individual, environmental and social system perspectives. The environmental aspect unpacked the impact of the lecturers' work context, such as supportive measures for their ACD. The social aspect underpinned the exploration of the relationship between ACD and WLB, essentially serving as a means to understand the impact of ACD on social life or vice versa. The individual system underpinned the exploration of how being a female SLP-A academic impacted ACD.

## Research methods and design

The objectives of this study were to describe the SLP-A academics' experiences of being a female in pursuit of ACD and how this impacts on their WLB. Hermeneutic phenomenology design was adopted (Qutoshi, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a form of interpretive phenomenology that acknowledges that lived experiences are a means to understanding reality from the participants' perspectives, as done in the current study (Frechette et al., 2020). This design combines phenomenology, the exploration of lived experiences and hermeneutics, the exploration of meaning-making through the interpretation of phenomena (Godden & Kutsyuruba, 2023). As suggested by the same authors, this design allows the researcher to subjectively explore how the participants interpret their lived experiences. The researcher's own lived experiences may shape how they generate and interpret the study findings, as was the case in the current study. Therefore, the framework of choice, the literature and the researchers' experiences influenced the methods chosen.

### The participants

Eight purposively selected SLP-A lecturers at the University of Interest (UoI) (a pseudonym used to protect the institution's identity) participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews, guided by an interview schedule developed by the researcher. The participants had to be pursuing their PhD and have at least 2 years of full-time lecturing experience in the SLP-A disciplines (see Table 1). Academics who did not meet these criteria were excluded. See Table 1 for further details on the participants' backgrounds.

The participants ranged in age from 28 years to 52 years, with the majority in their 30s. Two participants held a speech-language pathology (SLP) degree, three had an audiology (A) degree and three had a dual degree (SLP-A). Six participants were audiology lecturers, while three were SLP lecturers. Participants 3, 4, and 8 were at an advanced stage of their Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) credentialing. The other participants were either at the data collection or proposal stage of their PhD. Overall, the participants were a good

**TABLE 1:** Participants' background.

Participant number	Age (years)	Qualification	Years of experience		Marital status	Number of children
			In academia	In DoH		
P1	39	SLP-A	5	10	Married	2
P2	52	SLP-A	11	19.5	Married	3
P3	36	A	12	3	Married	3
P4	34	A	6	7	Not married	1
P5	36	SLP	6	9	Married	4
P6	41	SLP	12	5	Married	0
P7	28	A	3	3	Not married	1
P8	37	SLP-A	10	5	Not married	1

Note: Table 1 is shared between the current and another manuscript.

SLP, speech language pathologist; A, audiologist; SLP-A, speech language pathology and audiology (a dually qualified profession); DoH, Department of Health.

representation of the typical demographics of the personnel within SLP-A disciplines.

### Data generation and analysis

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews conducted on the Zoom online platform and subsequently analysed verbatim through the same platform (Archibald et al., 2019). The interview schedule, developed by the researcher and informed by the literature, study objectives and the researcher's experiences, guided the interview (Kelliher et al., 2019; McMahon & Patton, 2018; Zacher et al., 2019) (see Online Appendix 1). Verbatim transcription was naturalised or cleaned to limit non-word verbalisations or clutter and enhance clarity (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). By listening to each interview at half-speed and reading the transcription simultaneously, the researcher ensured the accuracy of the transcription. Using NVivo version 12, thematic analysis was conducted, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87), within the hermeneutic phenomenological design recommended by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007). Initially, familiarisation was achieved through repeated listening to the interviews and reading of transcripts. Codes were allocated to emergent subthemes. Subthemes addressing similar experiences or views were grouped under one emergent theme. Familiarisation, immersion, theme development, synthesis and refinement resulted in the final themes presented in the results section of this article. Conducting these steps with each interview's data before conducting the next interview allowed the researcher to identify when no new themes were emerging from the latest interview data, a point of data saturation. Data generation was terminated at this point as interview 8 did not produce themes that had not already emerged from interviews 1 to 7 (Ahmed, 2025).

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was achieved in several ways, as guided by Ramsook (2018). The selection of participants with first-hand experiences of ACD enhanced the credibility of their reflections. The researcher's insider perspective as a developing lecturer in the audiology discipline also ensured depth in the participants' reflections, as insightful

probing in line with the hermeneutic phenomenology was implemented during the interviews (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). The methodological rigour and transparency ensured transferability of the methods and findings to contexts similar to the UoI, respectively. Hermeneutic phenomenology does not advocate for objective means of verifying the researchers' interpretations of the participants' lived experiences, as the researcher's own lived experiences are understood to be subjectively influenced by their background, history and past life experiences (Heidegger et al., 1962). Hence, objective measures of accuracy, such as member checking, were not conducted as they are arguably redundant and unnecessary in hermeneutic phenomenology (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). Instead, prioritising transparency and depth of reporting on the participants' experiences was ensured by sharing direct excerpts from the interviews with the participants.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Human and Social Sciences Ethics Research Committee on 04 November 2021. The ethical clearance number is HSSREC/00002775/2021. Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the UoI to access the SLP-A academics. Each participant also provided consent to voluntarily participate.

## Results

### The experienced academic career development support

Academic career development was experienced through three forms of support, indicated by the emergent themes. These included the experience of a supportive work environment, support for professional development as an educator and support for developing as a researcher (Table 2).

The SLP-A female academics experienced ACD in the form of *supportive work resources and conditions*. They had access to essential work resources, including IT and financial support, which were crucial to their academic development. The former included staff laptops, computer software and related IT support services necessary for academics to develop their teaching and research skills. The latter included funding for time away from teaching duties (temporary replacement of teaching staff), the University Capacity Development

Programme (UCDP), research scholarships and bursary opportunities (Participants 2 and 3), which contribute positively to the development of academics as researchers:

'We have good school management support and PG [*post-graduate research*] support. We do work in a very nice environment; independently, you don't have somebody breathing down your neck and telling you what to do every few minutes of the day ... At the university, we have a good IT infrastructure. I think we are very supported; I mean, many universities in Africa don't even have a laptop to take home, external funding, and opportunities for scholarships, for bursaries, for a whole lot of stuff.' (P2, 52-years-old, SLP-A, 11 years in academia)

The management at the UoI, allowed flexible work conditions for SLP-A staff, as long as they deliver on their work expectations (P2). The flexible work context, without micro-management, was considered by some of UoI's SLP-A staff as healthy, supportive and conducive to their developmental trajectories (Pajalic et al., 2023).

*Developing as a teacher* was experienced through accessing teacher training programmes designed to develop academics' teaching knowledge and skills. For instance, the compulsory University Education Induction Programme (UEIP) targeted all new academic staff at the UoI. This programme introduced novice lecturers to the basics of university teaching, assessment and research supervision:

'I was given that extended learning induction program (UEIP) where you did modules that tell you about teaching, assessments, and all of that.' (P5, 36-years-old, SLP, 6 years in academia)

'So, I've been to a lot of training in terms of Moodle, developing videos. And it's quite nice to have done that to provide that support and that infrastructure so that staff are able to make that transition from face-to-face to online kind of teaching and learning.' (P3, 36-years-old, A, 12 years in academia)

Accessing short upskilling training using learning management system (LMS) tools (Moodle or LEARN) equipped staff to optimise their teaching and efficiently cope with unexpected challenges, such as having to teach students remotely during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years. Such ongoing staff upskilling can contribute positively to innovative teaching and, therefore, to the development of academics as teachers (Inoncillo, 2024). Arguably, the effective use of LMS teaching resources should enhance teaching efficiency and enable academics to allocate more time to ACD activities, such as research.

There is a known positive correlation between research productivity and being a good lecturer (teacher), which suggests that improved teaching skills create space for academics to also improve as researchers or vice versa (Coccorese et al., 2024). The participants experienced *development as researchers* through receiving developmental employment posts aimed at fast-tracking their PhD credentialing and producing more research. Academics in the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) were expected to prioritise their PhD-related research over teaching responsibilities:

**TABLE 2:** Themes concerning experienced academic career development support.

Emergent themes	Subthemes
1. Supportive developmental (work) environment	1.1 Technological (IT resource) support 1.2 Financial support for teaching relief 1.3 Flexible working conditions
2. Support in developing as a researcher	2.1 Researcher development (credentialing support)
3. Support in developing as a teacher	3.1 Teacher training 3.2 Mentorship support

IT, information technology.

'I'll have to say the good thing is having the nGAP programme. The nGAP programme has been very effective in a sense that it provides you those structured opportunities to develop.' (P1, 39-years-old, SLP-A, 5 years in academia)

'Funding for research. I've benefited from the College of Health Sciences funding. I've benefited from Funding from UCDP. And as I said, as a result of being female and being Black.' (P3, 36, A, 12 years)

Academics who were part of the nGAP programme and large-scale research projects or other developmental programmes used such platforms to also access *mentorship*, which is considered important for ACD as a teacher and a researcher. Participants 1, 4 and 5 shared their experiences in this regard:

'So, for example, I have a mentor who doesn't only mentor me in terms of tracking the balance between academia and personal life, but also supports me too.' (P1, 39-years-old, SLP-A, 5 years in academia)

'So, I am getting a lot of support in terms of my PhD, because here in [UoI] I've been given a mentor. And that also gives me another supportive wing. So yeah, between the place where I'm doing my PhD [another university], the topic, and all the people I'm working with, I'm getting a lot of mentorship support.' (P5, 36-years-old, SLP, 6 years in academia)

The credentialing of staff towards PhD degrees is a high priority for institutions that intend to be among the leading contributors to new knowledge and strive to be globally recognised (Joseph Jeyaraj et al., 2021). The current study findings suggest that support to improve staff as researchers is made available for academics in the SLP-A disciplines at the UoI. However, there may be challenges that compromise its accessibility, which potentially limit its impact on ACD. Some of those challenges are discussed next.

## The experienced academic career development challenges

Access to available developmental support programs, such as the UCDP, Developing Research Innovation Localisation and Leadership (DRILL) and the nGAP at the UoI, is restricted by the dynamics at the discipline level, which can limit the staff's ACD. Table 3 summarises some of the challenges in this regard.

The *lack of time* due to teaching and related commitments made the developmental trajectories challenging for academics in SLP-A disciplines. Work intensification has resulted in unhealthy pressure, limiting staff from accessing ACD opportunities that were made available to them (Joseph Jeyaraj et al., 2021). They could not find the time to set aside for ACD activities as Participants 2 and 4 elaborate:

**TABLE 3:** Academic career development challenges.

Emergent themes	Subthemes
4. Lack of time	4.1 Misalignment between KPAs and discipline expectations (workload)
5. Lack of intradisciplinary mentorship	5.1 Lack of support between senior and new or relatively junior staff members
	5.2 Competing for ACD opportunities within the discipline

KPA, key performance area; ACD, academic career development.

'I think the problem was you're so busy with work and doing other things that you may not take up a lot of the opportunities [for career development], but that's not the fault of the institution per se.' (P2, 52-years-old, SLP-A, 11 years in academia)

'In terms of the institution, opportunities and resources are made available. The challenge is time [to access those resources]. So, I would say the institution is doing their part.' (P7, 28-years-old, A, 3 years in academia)

Such a lack of time to pursue ACD activities also stems from the misalignment between the staff's key performance areas (KPA) and how they allocate their time in practice. They tend to spend more time teaching, while their key performance area ratings do not acknowledge this as a strong consideration towards academic promotion:

'If the effort I put into teaching and learning weighed more, then I would be far [in terms of ACD]. But at the moment, the teaching is 5%. Research and community engagement are 95%. Yeah, but in reality, I spend 5% on research and community staff and 95% on teaching and learning.' (P4, 34-years-old, A, 6 years in academia)

'As much as the university gives you time off to do your research, there are certain underlying things that are not part of your contract that you are still required to do. In my case, inasmuch as I was given time off, because there was nobody who could fill in my post, I was forced to still teach. I think for the two years that I was a developmental lecturer [nGAP]; I was still involved in the clinics.' (P3, 36-years-old, A, 12 years in academia)

Developmental lecturers in the nGAP programme are expected to spend the majority of their time credentialing towards their PhD and minimise the time spent on teaching and related administration. Yet, Participant 3 found herself doing more teaching and related administration than required by her contract, which compromised the time she spent on ACD activities.

In addition to time constraints, a *lack of intradisciplinary mentorship* from senior staff within the discipline further compromised ACD. The participants experienced a lack of support from senior staff in terms of orienting and welcoming them into academia. There was, thus, no easement or smooth transition into the discipline-specific academic practices, as the staff felt that they were thrown into the deep end and expected to swim with minimal support:

'There isn't enough collaboration between senior staff and junior staff. So, you find that new staff is just expected to know how things function and operate. And when errors happen, it's like "you should have asked for help," but there is no guidance to say this is how it's done and this is what is expected.' (P1, 39-years-old, SLP-A, 5 years in academia)

'In the discipline, definitely there was no support whatsoever. I was just expected to swim.' (P5, 36-years-old, SLP, 6 years in academia)

'You find that some of us have never gotten templates of how this whole thing [being a good academic] is done. So, personally, I feel, at times, I was thrown in the deep end. And was expected to swim, which I'm still swimming from the deep end, coming back to shore.' (P8, 37-years-old, SLP-A, 10 years in academia)

The participants experienced *competition for ACD opportunities* instead of mentorship support from senior staff. Thus, when opportunities for career development were presented, not all members had an equal chance to access them. The participants felt that some staff members were prioritised over others:

'Where the problem comes is in the discipline, where you're all competing for the same thing. So, we all want to attend stuff [workshops]. We all want time out [teaching relief], like the sabbaticals and all of that. Some peoples' demands are prioritised more than yours. So, I think the stumbling block is typically at the Discipline.' (P4, 34-years-old, A, 6 years in academia)

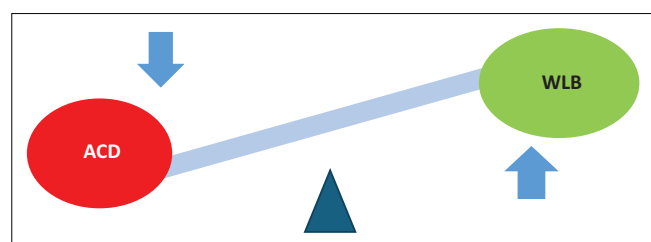
'I think, apart from putting pressure to achieve, there isn't much support. Apart from maybe providing some financial support for teaching relief, but then, when it comes down to the discipline level, we don't have the staff to relieve us of teaching.' (P6, 41-years-old, SLP, 12 years in academia)

The lack of support within the discipline led to logistical challenges in accessing teaching relief, even when the funding for it was made available. The discipline could not provide the necessary temporary replacement staff to carry out teaching and related administrative duties on behalf of the permanent academic staff who received teaching relief funding. Instead, academic staff within the discipline were competing for teaching relief opportunities. The inability to access teaching relief, which would allow them to focus their energy on their PhDs and produce research publications, hindered the academics' development. As a result, the SLP-A academics had to find time outside of their work hours to engage in ACD activities. Social life had to be compromised.

### Poor work–life balance for developing academics

Due to having to compromise their social life to make time for ACD, developing academics at the UoI experienced poorer work–life balance (WLB) while pursuing ACD. They therefore experienced their ACD ambitions as negatively affecting their WLB, with the latter being compromised. Others reported a mutually negative experience of poor WLB leading to poor ACD or vice versa. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the antagonistic and mutually negative relationship between ACD and WLB, respectively.

All participants experienced a slower pace of ACD than intended. They were all committed to prioritising their ACD, putting more effort towards obtaining their PhD qualification. Therefore, they all experienced a compromised WLB



ACD, academic career development; WLB, work-life balance.

**FIGURE 2:** Experienced antagonistic work–life balance-academic career development relationship.

(Figure 2). Participants 7 and 8 elaborate on the antagonistic and mutually negative experiences between WLB and ACD, respectively:

'Ok, I think it [trying to improve the WLB] would have a negative impact on career development simply because, currently, I use every little time I have to work on my work and improving or advancing my career through my credentialing. And if I were to cut back, I don't think I would have a greater chance of getting where I need to go.' (P7, 28-years-old, A, 3 years in academia)

'And my work and life are very, very, not balanced. Hence, I'm saying that career development is then suffering.' (P8, 37-years-old, SLP-A, 10 years in academia)

The above excerpts suggest that the academics in pursuit of ACD did not have a healthy WLB. In some cases, both ACD and WLB were compromised (P8). This is consistent with Martin and Stanfill (2023), who argued that academics who experience poor WLB are unlikely to achieve optimum ACD. Furthermore, developing female academics typically struggle to find WLB, further highlighting a need to adopt a unique perspective concerning work intensification for female academics (Rajagopal et al., 2024).

### Being female in pursuit of academic career development

The SLP-A academics at the UoI experienced being female as predominantly advantageous for ACD opportunities. They reported experiencing relatively more support opportunities towards ACD than their male counterparts. Participants 1 and 8 elaborate:

'Opportunities are now deliberately being made available for women. So, for me personally, it's [being a female academic] been positive because I've been a benefactor. I feel that I wouldn't have had the nGAP post if I wasn't female and Black.' (P1, 39-years-old, SLP-A, 5 years in academia)

'I think there's more opportunities for young Black females if you look at some funding opportunities. So, I'll give you an example: there's a grant that the NRF [National Research Fund] offers for a sabbatical every year, but it's restricted to a Black female academic who is less than 40 years of age.' (P8, 37-years-old, SLP-A, 10 years in academia)

The findings suggest that the UoI has mechanisms to prioritise female academics' ACD. Examples included developmental academic employment posts, such as the



ACD, academic career development; WLB, work-life balance.

**FIGURE 3:** Experienced poor work–life balance and poor academic career development.

nGAP, and the availability of funding opportunities, such as the NRF funding. While these developmental mechanisms were also available for male academics, the findings suggest that female academics were typically a priority at the SLP-A disciplines of the UoI.

## Discussion

Framed by the systems theory framework (STF) (Figure 1), the study explored the experiences of academic career development. The key principle of this framework is that every individual exists within a set of systems or factors that influence their developmental trajectories, including career development (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Specifically, the individual, social and environmental systems play a pivotal role in individuals' careers and career development, as is the case with the career development of female speech-language therapy and audiology academics of the UoI.

Within the work environment (the environmental system), academic leadership, teaching and related administration, as well as research, are known crucial elements of ACD (Zacher et al., 2019). The participants' experiences suggest that developmental support was made available to the SLP-A disciplines at the UoI. Flexible working conditions, essential work resources, training on learning management systems and holistic induction through the UEIP programme contributed positively to the staff's ACD as teachers and research supervisors. Similar support is provided by other universities in the country. For instance, academics at Mangosuthu University of Technology were exposed to pedagogic training programmes that developed university teachers (Gumede et al., 2023). Similarly, Van Wyk et al. (2019) explored the impact of orientation and upskilling programmes conducted at the University of Free State's Health Sciences Faculty for newly appointed staff members. The courses were reported to be valuable means of developing early-career lecturers' skills and exposing them to supportive networks to enhance their teaching skills.

Furthermore, the nGAP developmental post and the DRILL programmes at the UoI were experienced as instrumental in developing SLP-A academics as researchers, for those who had accessed them. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is a similar case in point with its developmental programmes geared towards effectively improving academics' research, teaching and academic leadership skills (Sadler & Jaarsveldt, 2012). This suggests that research support is typically provided at universities for developing staff.

One-to-one mentorship added to the above-mentioned supportive developmental programmes. Some SLP-A academics sought such one-to-one guidance from more senior colleagues who had already successfully navigated the ACD trajectory. The developmental role of mentorship to these academics was quite significant, as women often report experiencing more challenges in advancing their academic careers compared with their male counterparts for a plethora of reasons, including having much more

home responsibilities that compete with work (Moors et al., 2022; Ntshongwana, 2024). It is concerning, however, that such support was sought outside the SLP-A disciplines, suggesting that the developing staff may have missed out on discipline-specific mentorship from their senior colleagues.

Discipline-specific one-to-one mentorship would have been instrumental since health sciences lecturers are typically not trained as educators. Yet, all university lecturers are expected to demonstrate excellence in their teaching and related activities (Bahramnezhad & Keshmiri, 2025). Their adjustment from being healthcare providers to academics is thus a steep mountain to climb. Instead of receiving the much-needed intradisciplinary mentorship, the participants experienced an unhealthy competition for ACD opportunities with other SLP-A colleagues. Therefore, some academics faced the disadvantage of unfair competition with senior staff when competing for ACD opportunities, unless those opportunities were exclusive to relatively junior staff. This suggests that the flow of ACD support initiatives needs to be better controlled by protecting junior staff from interference that impedes their access to the support they need. Therefore, the ACD support initiative intended for female SLP-A academics would not only be available but truly accessible with minimal interference from their disciplines.

The female academics' social system was significantly compromised and dominated by the demands of their academic careers. To this end, SLP-A academics found it difficult to balance work and social life, as they had to compromise the latter while developing their academic careers and coping with the demands of work intensification. Hence, there was an antagonistic or mutually negative relationship between WLB and ACD. Specifically, excessively prioritising ACD led to poor WLB. Such a compromised WLB seems to be a challenge that academics have become desensitised to. A survey study by Stratford et al. (2024) conducted in an Australian university reported a similar challenge, where early career academics struggled to sufficiently attend to the competing work demands alone and experienced a poor WLB as a result, which suggests that this challenge is experienced beyond South Africa and Africa at large. Such a challenge can lead to workaholism, where excessive work is prioritised over social and personal experiences, a phenomenon experienced by nursing academics at a Saudi Arabian University, with 86.8% of them reporting work-life imbalance as a result (Abou Hashish et al., 2024). The current study findings suggest that there may be a counterculture in academia and in the specific SLP-A discipline at the UoI that normalises workaholism at a cost of WLB.

Overall, the current study findings suggest that, within the participants' personal system, being female makes certain developmental opportunities more available compared with male counterparts. Yet certain challenges within their work environment or environmental system restrict access to those opportunities. When support is made available, there

is insufficient time to access it due to teaching, credentialing, clinical supervising and conducting their own research (Khan & Siriwardhane, 2021). This makes female academics struggle with the pursuit of ACD and progress relatively slower than required. They then resort to compromising their social life in attempts to cope with the work intensification while developing as academics, which compromises their WLB. Hence, some lecturers in the health sciences often experience partial neglect of the ACD while prioritising their other work roles and simultaneously having a compromised social life (Christophersen, 2017).

### Limitations and recommendations

Qualitative research does not intend to generalise but to gain a deep understanding of specific contexts, as was the intention of the current study. In line with a qualitative design, this study was conducted with a small group of participants in the audiology and speech-language pathology disciplines of the UoI. Therefore, the study findings are only applicable (transferable) to institutions and situations that are contextually similar to the UoI's SLP-A disciplines. Despite achieving the study aim, several design-related limitations should be noted. The key interest was the participants' reflection on their reality, and not the objective truth, in line with the hermeneutic phenomenological design. While such a subjective nature of the design is fully acceptable within the chosen design, it can also be considered a limitation. The design also does not encourage objective means of verifying the findings, such as member checking. Such practice is considered redundant within Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, as the primary aim of this design is to facilitate the subjective understanding of the participants' experiences. This may be considered a limitation. To address these limitations, ACD and WLB should be explored from different and wider methodological perspectives. Similar research should, therefore, be conducted on a larger scale, involving more disciplines and universities, to avoid the limitation of focusing on a smaller context and to encourage a wider generalisability.

### Study implications

This study addresses the identified knowledge gap regarding the experienced ACD among female SLP-A academics at a South African university and its related impact on WLB. It provided the basis on which higher education institutions could improve their policy development to support or fast-track female academics' ACD and protect junior academics from ACD restrictions. The study further showed that there is a need to further explore the logistics of facilitating access to the available ACD opportunities for developing staff, without compromising the quality of their teaching and related administration and without negatively affecting their WLB.

The UoI has a wellness programme geared towards supporting the mental health of staff, along with flexible working hours to assist with WLB. However, there is currently no specific policy strictly focused on the staff's WLB, an area that needs to be explored further through

stakeholder engagements between departments such as the human resources, academic leadership and quality assurance. The allocation of teaching workloads and other related administrative tasks appears to be ignorant of the other commitments of academic staff, including ACD activities such as credentialing for a PhD degree and conducting research to meet the publication output demands. There is a need to explore the best way to sync each staff member's key performance area allocations with other work expectations to help staff prioritise their work and ACD activities accordingly.

## Conclusion

The mechanisms by which ACD initiatives are filtered down to target staff should be explored further and then protected from interference by imposed teaching and administrative responsibilities. While female academics are prioritised for ACD, there is a need to explore how a positive correlation can be forged between ACD initiatives and WLB. This way, developmental support policies would be more holistic in considering the dynamics of being a developing female academic who also has social responsibilities.

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

### CRedit authorship contribution

Musa Makhoba: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualisation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.M., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the

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