Research Article

Navigating Transition: From Alumnus and Professional Development Tutor to Faculty in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Transitioning from the role of an alumnus and professional development tutor to that of a faculty member in higher education represents a significant and multifaceted journey marked by personal transformation and professional development. This reflective paper explores the lived experiences and key insights gained throughout this transition, beginning with a strong academic foundation as an alumnus and progressing through formative roles as a tutor engaged in mentorship, curriculum development, and instructional design. The shift to a faculty position introduced new challenges, including navigating academic autonomy, managing increased responsibilities, and aligning with institutional expectations. Drawing on resilience, self-awareness, and intentional adaptation, the transition was marked by a deepened understanding of academic identity and professional purpose. Collaborative engagement with colleagues, cultivating a sense of belonging, and embracing pedagogical innovation played a central role in overcoming barriers and fostering success. This reflection also highlights the value of continuous learning and critical self-reflection in responding to the evolving demands of higher education. Ultimately, the journey affirms that transitions, while complex, offer opportunities for profound growth and reaffirm the importance of reflective practice, community, and a sustained commitment to academic excellence.

Keywords: Alumnus; Faculty; Higher education; Mentorship; Professional development tutor; Support; Transition

Introduction

The importance of this piece is that there are very few pieces of literature that map skills learnt at the alumni level onto faculty roles in higher education. Irons identifies this lack of mapping and calls for research and contributions to bridge and inform what is essentially only current practice. There are many factors, influences, drivers, and motivations that led to this decision-making process, including a firm belief and academic desire from my MScEd that I was capable of performing this role. However, in terms of making this decision and understanding the choice to move to academia, this was based on mentoring relationships rather than pure occupational transition or role identification due to personality traits, occupational roles in part-time, casualized contracts, or the level of commitment required for PhD study. The transition was an expression of a love of teaching and practice, an expression that the defining influential mentors that were mainly gained through my service provision, throughout my life were passing on to me. These pseudo-teaching mentors have included both faculty as my service provider role and those faculty responsible for master teaching received at the institution. I have always sought to emulate and have used the metaphorical football analogue that teaching is 'the beautiful game' because teaching is about excellence and quality and embodying passion irrespective of which level of University, what subject or the nature of the client. I have therefore been taught and taken through both the good and bad teaching practices with me to ensure that I could offer the best teaching and support in my working practice in the future. These Faculty/academic models and the idea of teaching as the football game suggests, there are perfect teaching role models and there are methods and strategies to develop teaching abilities. These did provide a model for my occupational intentions and demonstrated that a Master's or PhD is not an essential teaching requirement, suggesting that good teaching can be intuitive, subtle, and not outcome results-centric, offering room for enjoyment and learning in both receiver and sender.

The purpose of this reflective paper is to provide a reflexive account of a journey that has moved from being a service provider in both the wider and then later higher education sectors, to a service provider that performed the role of a professional development tutor (PDT) for the recipients of the services offered at my educational institution, including research, fieldwork and some series of professional development programs. Then finally, the journey has led to a stage of firmly cementing a foothold into academia as a full-time, full teaching load post. This narrative piece is a reflective account of that journey and specifically the process and challenges faced in moving from master study through being a PDT into a full-time teaching role in academia at a higher education institution in Tanzania, East Africa. Additionally, this paper maps and reflects upon previous literature that specifically investigates the graduate transition process and currently informs best practices in terms of guidelines and interventions useful to improving this significant period of change in the educational lifecycle.

Background and Context

As an alumnus, the foundation of my academic and professional identity was shaped by my experiences and interactions within the institution. Returning to the same environment, but in a different capacity, provided a unique vantage point. The familiarity with the campus culture, institutional values, and academic expectations fostered a seamless integration into the faculty role. As a former student, my deep understanding of the institution's ethos and operational dynamics proved invaluable. The established relationships with peers, professors, and administrative staff facilitated smoother transitions in collaborative efforts and interdisciplinary projects. Having recently navigated the challenges and triumphs of student life, I carried a heightened empathy for current students. This empathy translated into more effective mentorship and advising, as I could relate to their experiences and offer tailored guidance. My time as an alumnus was characterised by a relentless pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement. This learning period reinforced the importance of lifelong education, a principle I strive to instil in my students. The alumni network also served as a resource for ongoing professional development and opportunities.

The journey from alumnus and PDT to faculty member in higher education is complex and multifaceted. By applying theoretical frameworks like Schlossberg's Transition Theory and engaging with contemporary research on educational transitions, individuals can better understand their experiences and develop strategies for success (Austin, 2002; Marcdante et al., 2020). Emphasizing continuous professional development and leveraging support systems not only facilitates personal growth but also enhances contributions to the academic community (Willems et al., 2021). As higher education continues to evolve, fostering resilience and adaptability will be essential for navigating future transitions effectively (Jørgensen, 2012).

Professional development plays a crucial role in preparing individuals for academic positions. As a PDT, my focus was on enhancing the skills of others, an experience that honed my ability to facilitate learning and foster critical thinking. This background provided a solid foundation for my new role as a faculty member, where I now engage in curriculum design and implementation, student assessment, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Additionally, theories such as transformative learning and Social Learning Theories that encompass teacher growth and adult education are particularly relevant here. For instance, Mezirow's transformative learning theory emphasizes the importance of critical self-reflection in adult education, suggesting that meaningful change occurs when individuals examine their assumptions about learning and teaching (Wang, 2018). This perspective has influenced my approach to transformation as a faculty, encouraging me to create an environment where my students can engage in reflective practice.

As a professional development tutor, my responsibilities extended beyond mere academic instruction to fostering the holistic development of students. This role was instrumental in honing my pedagogical skills, leadership abilities, and a deeper commitment to educational excellence. The role of a PDT demanded the continuous refinement of teaching methodologies and the ability to adapt to diverse learning needs. Engaging in various professional development workshops and reflective practices enhanced my instructional strategies, making me more effective in the classroom. Being a PDT provided me with a platform to mentor students, guiding them through research, academic challenges and career planning. This experience cultivated my leadership skills and underscored the significance of supportive and transformative mentorship in higher education. Serving as a PDT underscored the importance of staying abreast with the latest advancements in educational practices. This role required a commitment to personal and professional growth, which laid a strong foundation for my transition to a faculty position. Engaging in continuous professional development activities ensured that my knowledge and skills remained current and relevant.

The convergence of experiences as an alumnus and a professional development tutor created a synergistic effect, enriching my transition to faculty. This dual perspective enabled me to blend institutional familiarity with advanced pedagogical skills, fostering a comprehensive approach to teaching and mentorship. The amalgamation of these roles informed my educational philosophy, emphasizing the integration of empathy, continuous learning, and student-centered teaching. This holistic approach aims to cultivate an enriching learning environment that supports the academic and personal growth of students. The insights gained from both roles facilitated enhanced collaboration with colleagues and contributed to innovative teaching practices. My unique perspective allowed me to bridge gaps between different stakeholders, fostering a collaborative and inclusive academic community.

Given the wealth of experience and expertise bridging theory and practice, a successful transition is required. Encouraging current PDTs and those considering transitioning into full-time faculty roles Duță and Rafailă (2014) highlight that, developing a concept or research-informed practice is important in moving away from the evidence-based practice model. The potential to model lifelong learning and foster critical citizenship and individual professional growth is evident (Phuong et al., 2018). Leadership and organizational commitment in contextualizing transition should include providing development opportunities that enable introduction, intervention, and continued development (Flores & Day, 2006). This has proven successful if employed throughout individual professional learning lifecycles (Fabriz et al., 2021). Besides, providing research-informed practice during faculty development offers a suite of professional development routes that are 'co-created' (Briggs et al., 2012; Morris & Usher, 2011). Required reflexivity on the individual's part, in recognition of their personal stories concerning transition, should be embedded into any part-time or full-time faculty, induction and ongoing academic tiered program at higher education.

Faculty Identity Formation

Faculty identity development is a dynamic process influenced by personal experiences, institutional culture, and professional expectations (Li & Lee, 2024). Early career faculty often grapple with shifting from a student or tutor role to that of an independent academic, requiring them to redefine their professional identities (Willems et al., 2021). Boutiuc-Kaiser (2024) suggest that identity construction is an ongoing negotiation between personal beliefs, institutional roles, and external expectations. Returning to an institution where one previously studied and worked adds a layer of complexity, as individuals must renegotiate their relationships with former mentors and colleagues while establishing themselves as faculty (Austin, 2002).

In science education, identity formation is further shaped by disciplinary norms and expectations. Carlone and Johnson (2007) propose that professional identity develops through situated learning within a community of practice. For new science faculty, this means transitioning from a learner to a knowledge producer and mentor, often requiring a shift in how they perceive their expertise and authority (Marcdante et al., 2020). This transition can be particularly pronounced when returning to an institution as faculty, where past relationships and experiences influence one's evolving professional self-concept.

Pedagogical Adaptation and Student Engagement

As new faculty members transition into their roles, they must refine their teaching methodologies to align with student-centered learning approaches (Ovens et al., 2016). Unlike tutoring, faculty responsibilities extend beyond facilitation to curriculum design, assessment strategies, and fostering critical thinking skills among students. Research by Bullock (2011) underscores the significance of a conceptual change approach to teaching, where educators move from information transmission to student-focused teaching. For those transitioning from professional development tutors, the challenge lies in adapting previously used facilitation techniques to a broader, more autonomous classroom environment (Hager & Hodkinson, 2011).

In science education, pedagogical adaptation is particularly crucial, given the need for inquiry-based learning and active engagement strategies (Schumann et al., 2024). Faculty returning to their alma mater may benefit from leveraging institutional teaching and learning centers to support evidence-based instructional strategies. The transition also necessitates engagement with undergraduate research mentoring, interdisciplinary collaborations, and leveraging technology-enhanced learning tools to align with modern pedagogical demands (Heffernan & McKay, 2019).

Opportunities, Personal and Professional Growth

My journey began as an alumnus, where I cultivated a deep appreciation for academia and a passion for facilitating students' growth and development. Going back to school was paramount to achieving my passion and dream. As a PDT, I honed my skills in mentorship, curriculum design, and instructional delivery, laying the foundation for my transition to a faculty role.

One of the most profound aspects of this transition has been the opportunity for personal and professional growth (Averill & Major, 2020; Benson et al., 2014; Nyström et al., 2008). Stepping into a faculty position challenged me to expand my expertise, refine my pedagogical approaches, and engage in scholarly activities. Embracing this growth mindset has allowed me to continually evolve as an educator, enriching both my teaching practice and my contribution to the academic community.

Despite the challenges, transitioning to a faculty position offers opportunities for professional growth, increased autonomy, and academic contributions through research and scholarship. Academic career development models emphasize continuous learning, reflective practice, and engagement in scholarly communities (Gale & Parker, 2014). Engaging in professional networks, research collaborations, and institutional initiatives enables new faculty to integrate into the academic environment effectively.

Returning to one's alma mater as faculty also presents unique opportunities for fostering mentorship relationships with students who may relate to one's academic journey (Briggs et al., 2012). Science faculty can leverage their institutional familiarity to contribute to curriculum development, research initiatives, and outreach programs that align with the university's mission. Moreover, maintaining a reflective practice and contributing to scholarship in science education can help solidify faculty identity and enhance teaching effectiveness (Vescio et al., 2008).

Transition Challenges and Learning Experiences

Transitioning to a faculty role presented its fair share of challenges. However, understanding these challenges through the lens of Social Learning Theory (SLT) offers valuable insights. SLT posits that learning occurs through observation and interaction within social contexts (Boumpouri & Galanakis, 2022). By collaborating with colleagues and engaging in professional communities (Gale & Parker, 2014), I can navigate these challenges more effectively. Furthermore, the Theory of Improvement in professional development emphasizes that effective programs should stimulate teachers' learning through collaborative inquiry (Sims et al., 2023). This approach resonates with my experience as a teacher educator; fostering a community of practice among faculty members can enhance our collective teaching effectiveness while supporting individual growth.

One of the most significant challenges encountered from navigating the complexities of academic bureaucracy to balancing teaching responsibilities with research endeavours was adapting to the increased level of autonomy and responsibility inherent in the faculty position. This challenge served as a valuable learning experience, equipping me with resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving

skills. Collaborating with colleagues, seeking mentorship, and engaging in professional development opportunities were instrumental in overcoming these challenges and finding my stride as a faculty member.

The transition from being an ordinary teacher educator like a PDT to faculty involves professional socialisation, where individuals learn and adapt to the expectations and norms of academia (Boutiuc-Kaiser, 2024). Baker and Lattuca (2010) describe professional socialization as encompassing knowledge acquisition, role internalization, and identity transformation. Thus, returning to one's alma mater as faculty presents unique socialization challenges, including shifting power dynamics with former professors and navigating pre-existing institutional norms (Li & Lee, 2024).

New faculty members often experience imposter syndrome, feelings of self-doubt, and challenges in developing their scholarly voice (Shin & Jung, 2014). However, the shift requires acclimatization to institutional policies, research expectations, and pedagogical strategies suited for adult learners in higher education (Hager & Hodkinson, 2011). Studies highlight that support systems, mentorship programs, and faculty development initiatives play crucial roles in easing this transition (Flores & Day, 2006; Kinman, 2014). For science educators, engaging with professional organizations and discipline-specific teaching communities can also facilitate smoother integration and professional growth (Henderson et al., 2011).

Adapting to the academic culture can be challenging. Faculty members must navigate different expectations regarding research output, service commitments, and teaching loads. Many new faculty members experience feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt as they compare themselves to established colleagues. The demands of academia can lead to difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, particularly for those who may have previously enjoyed more structured hours (Duţă & Rafailă, 2014). Research indicates that these challenges are common among new faculty members across various disciplines (Shin & Jung, 2014). Addressing these issues through institutional support systems is crucial for fostering a positive transition experience.

Strategies for Success

The transition from an alumnus and professional development tutor to a faculty role in higher education is both challenging and rewarding. Success in this transition requires deliberate efforts in establishing a research agenda, enhancing teaching competencies, building professional networks, balancing multiple responsibilities, and demonstrating leadership. By adopting these strategies, new faculty members can navigate the academic landscape effectively, contribute meaningfully to their institutions, and establish a fulfilling and impactful career in higher education (Brown et al., 2023). Building strong relationships with colleagues and students fostered a sense of community and support (Gast et al., 2017; Van Velzen et al., 2010; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2019), creating an environment conducive to growth and collaboration (CEA, 2024; Nyström et al., 2008; Power, 1981). Additionally, maintaining a balance between teaching, research, and service commitments (Briggs et al., 2012), enabled me to fulfil my responsibilities effectively while prioritizing self-care and well-being (Y. Li, 2018; Nevgi & Löfström, 2015).

Furthermore, embracing innovation and leveraging technology enhanced my teaching pedagogy, fostering student engagement and learning outcomes (Phuong et al., 2018). Continual reflection (Beck & Kosnik, 2001; Brookfield, 2019; Clayton & Ash, 2005) and self-assessment (Nyström et al., 2008; Schön, 2017) allowed me to identify improvement areas and implement targeted enhancement strategies, ensuring ongoing professional development and growth.

A critical aspect of academic success is establishing a scholarly identity and a well-defined research agenda. Faculty members are expected to contribute to the body of knowledge through research, publications, and conference presentations (Phuong et al., 2018). Engaging in active research by identifying a niche within the discipline (Vescio et al., 2008), formulating research questions, and publishing in peer-reviewed journals enhance credibility and academic standing (Schumann et al., 2024). Collaborating with established scholars facilitates mentorship, provides insights into publication strategies, and strengthens academic networks (Heffernan & McKay, 2019; Lei et al., 2021). Moreover, seeking research funding by applying for grants and fellowships supports research activities and increases visibility within the academic community. Thus, Maintaining a consistent research output by setting realistic research goals and adhering to structured timelines assured steady academic progress (Brown et al., 2023).

Transitioning from a professional development tutor to a faculty role requires a shift from training professionals to engaging in formal higher education teaching. On this matter, Enhancing my pedagogical skills involved adopting student-centered teaching approaches, such as problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, and experiential learning, which fostered student engagement and deep understanding (Morris & Patel, 2020). In addition, integrating technology in teaching by leveraging digital tools, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and other virtual platforms like Zoom, teams, Google Classroom etc… enriches the teaching-learning process (Biggs & Tang, 2015). Continuous professional development through attending both in-person and online workshops, obtaining certifications of participation and budges, as well as engaging in reflective teaching practices improved my instructional effectiveness. Furthermore, Developing my course design and assessment skills by constructing well-structured course handbooks and outlines, incorporating diverse assessment strategies, and aligning learning outcomes with institutional goals (Morris & Usher, 2011) were essential for effective teaching.

My Academic success is heavily influenced by professional relationships and networking within and beyond the institution. Engaging in institutional service and committees, such as participating in various committee appointments at different appointments, curriculum development, and policy discussions, enhances institutional integration and visibility as highlighted by White and Anderson (2021). Moreover, connecting with professional associations through membership in academic societies and attending

international conferences facilitates knowledge exchange and collaborative research opportunities. Similarly, seeking mentorship and peer support from senior colleagues and engaging in faculty mentorship programs accelerate professional growth and career advancement (Kinman, 2014). Additionally, leveraging social media for academic networking through platforms such as ResearchGate, LinkedIn, and Google Scholar offers avenues for scholarly engagement and professional branding (Gast et al., 2017). Faculty members are required to balance multiple roles, including teaching, research, and service. Not only that, but effective time management and prioritization by allocating specific time slots for research, class preparation, and other administrative duties enhances productivity (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). Setting realistic goals and expectations while avoiding overcommitment and aligning tasks with long-term career objectives prevents burnout (Shin & Jung, 2014). Besides, seeking institutional support by utilizing faculty development programs, research funding, and workload adjustments supports efficiency and well-being. Moreover, practising self-care and work-life balance strategies, including exercise, mindfulness, and social engagement, promotes long-term career sustainability (Hager & Hodkinson, 2011).

Success in higher education extends beyond individual growth to influencing institutional development and student success. Demonstrating leadership and innovation through engaging in curriculum innovation, such as leading efforts to introduce contemporary and interdisciplinary courses, enhances institutional competitiveness (Robinson & Hill, 2021). Mentoring students and early-career academics by providing guidance fosters academic excellence and professional development. Additionally, advocating for policy reforms and institutional growth by contributing to governance, policy formation, and higher education reforms enhances academic leadership potential (Kim & Thomas, 2023). Likewise, embracing lifelong learning and adaptability by staying abreast of emerging trends in higher education, pedagogy, and disciplinary advancements ensures sustained relevance and career progression (Williams, 2023).

Conclusion

The transition from an alumnus and professional development tutor to a faculty member in higher education is a multi-faceted journey that encompasses identity formation, professional socialization, and pedagogical adaptation. This reflective journey is deeply personal yet shaped by broader institutional norms and academic expectations. While the transition presents challenges such as shifting professional relationships, imposter syndrome, and the need to establish credibility as a faculty member, it also offers invaluable opportunities for career development, mentorship, and academic contributions.

For science educators like me, the transition requires embracing innovative pedagogical strategies, engaging with professional learning communities, and aligning teaching approaches with the dynamic needs of higher education. Drawing on existing institutional support structures, participating in faculty development programs like those provided by QTL_net at our institution, and cultivating a network of academic mentors can significantly ease the transition. Additionally, leveraging the experience of being a former student and PDT from the same institution provides a unique perspective that can enrich teaching and research efforts.

Reflecting on this journey highlights the importance of adaptability, continuous learning, and professional engagement. Returning to one's alma mater as faculty fosters a sense of belonging and commitment to institutional growth while offering an opportunity to give back by shaping future generations of students. Ultimately, successfully navigating this transition requires resilience, scholarly engagement, and a commitment to lifelong learning in the academic landscape.

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The author(s) should confirm ethical practice on their submission as follows: I, **Esther Samwel Kibga** the author of this article would like to confirm that I have observed the fundamental principles of ethical practice which include anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, the right of participants to withdraw with no consequences, not inflicting any harm to participants, fair analysis and truthful reporting. Further, I commit to contributing to the development of knowledge, understanding and practice in the area of scholarship.