Professional identity of faculty members at higher education institutions: a criterion for workplace success

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Professional identity of faculty members at higher education institutions: a criterion for workplace success

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This research aimed to develop and validate a psychometrically sound and convenient measure of the professional identity questionnaire (PIQ) and to determine the level of professional identity among faculty members employed by higher education institutions in Jordan. The PIQ was administered to a sample of 551 faculty members employed by three universities in Jordan. The data set was subject to exploratory factor analysis utilising principal axis factoring with oblique rotation to uncover the underlying structure of the PIQ. Four factors emerged with 25 items retained. These factors were self-related identity, skill-related identity, work-related identity and student-related identity. Internal consistency reliability coefficients for these factors ranged between 0.89 and 0.94. The results indicated that faculty members possessed high levels of self-related and skill-related identities, moderate levels of work-related identities and low levels of student-related identities. The study ended with a number of theoretical and practical recommendations for the field of study.

Keywords: professional identity; identity; higher education; faculty members; Jordan

Introduction and theoretical framework

In the past decade, professional identity has emerged as an important evolving research area in the field of education (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004). It is believed that the professional identity of educators has a significant effect on the educational academic achievement of students (Beckett and Gough 2004; Krejsler 2005; Robinson and McMillan 2006). Professional identity in general has been defined as the possession of a core set of values, beliefs and assumptions about the distinctive characteristics of one’s selected career that differentiates it from other careers (Weinrach, Thomas, and Chan 2001). Enyedy, Goldberg, and Welsh (2006) defined professional identity as the commitment of educators to their professional practices. In other words, the more committed that educators are to their practices, the more likely they are to identify themselves as professional educators.

Professional identity is something that develops during one’s whole life, and provides educators with a sense of continuity with the past, meaning in the present and direction for the future (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Levine and Cote

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The concept also refers to what educators find important in their professional work lives, based on their own experiences, life histories and personal backgrounds (Tickle 2000; Vuorikoski 2001). Moreover, professional identity is an interconnection between the meanings that people attach to themselves (actual identity, personal identity or self-understanding) provided by their educational institutions and the meanings that are attributed by others in society (designated identity) about what educators should know and do (Kelchtermans 2005; Korthagen 2004; Sfard and Prusak 2005).

The ways educators see themselves are critical, particularly in current times of extraordinary changes. Educators with well-developed professional identities are more inclined to develop professionally, cope with educational change and implement innovations in their own teaching practice (Nias 1989). This implies that the potential to modify our professional identity is ever present. Through self-evaluation, one’s identity is continually informed, formed and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interaction with others (Cooper and Olson 1996).

The professional identity of educators is influenced by three main forces (Samuel and Stephens 2000): (1) inertial forces, which emanate from educators’ biographical experience of teaching and learning; (2) programmatic forces, which emanate from the educator’s education institution’s curriculum and programme (Danielewicz 2001); and (3) contextual forces, which derive from the macro-educational environment of policy. According to Helms (1998), professional identity can be influenced by society, culture and experience expressed in four dimensions: (1) actions, (2) social expectations, or what people think others expect, (3) values and beliefs and (4) where people see themselves going or the kind of people they want to become.

On the other hand, Starr et al. (2006) proposed six elements that may play an essential role in forming educators’ professional identity: (1) intrinsic satisfaction from teaching, (2) having knowledge and skill about teaching, (3) belonging to a group of educators, (4) feeling a responsibility to teach, (5) sharing clinical expertise with learners and (6) receiving rewards for teaching.

Recently, Day et al. (2003) found that the core elements of educators’ professional identities are: motivation and commitment; beliefs, ideologies and personal and professional values; and efficacy and job satisfaction. Also, Danielewicz (2001) emphasised that the professional identity of educators can be enhanced through sharing their visions, philosophies, responsibilities, experiences and social values about their teaching.

Starr et al. (2003) argued that there are psychological and sociological factors impacting educators’ professional identity. Psychological factors encompass knowledge, experiences, life history, biography, personality, emotions, concerns, anxiety, attitudes, passion, motivation, satisfaction, commitment, confidence, dreams and hopes. Sociological factors embrace culture, schools, institutions, policy, reform movements and relationships with students, colleagues and staff. Further, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) maintain that to develop a solid professional identity, educators must be competent in the following areas: subjects taught and the general purposes of education, teaching practices (accommodating diverse learners, assessment and classroom management) and students’ development.

Sachs (2003) classified professional identity into two types: (1) entrepreneurial, which is associated with efficient, responsible and accountable educators who demonstrate compliance to externally imposed performance indicators with consistently high-quality teaching – this identity is characterised by being individualistic,
professional identity is an important area of research inquiry in the field of higher education. Research has indicated that professional identity is essential if one wants to become an educator. Educators with strong professional identities are more inclined to implement innovations in their own teaching practice and commit to their teaching profession. Little research has been done on educators’ professional identity in higher education settings, especially in Jordan. Also, research is lacking a sound and reliable instrument that measures the professional identity of educators in higher education. Therefore, the primary purposes of this study are to develop and validate a multidimensional and psychometric measure of professional identity in higher education settings that can be widely used to determine the level of professional identity among educators.

Statement of the problem
Professional identity is an important area of research inquiry in the field of higher education. Research has indicated that professional identity is essential if one wants to become an educator. Educators with strong professional identities are more inclined to implement innovations in their own teaching practice and commit to their teaching profession. Little research has been done on educators’ professional identity in higher education settings, especially in Jordan. Also, research is lacking a sound and reliable instrument that measures the professional identity of educators in higher education. Therefore, the primary purposes of this study are to develop and validate a multidimensional and psychometric measure of professional identity in higher education settings that can be widely used to determine the level of professional identity among educators.

Research objectives
To achieve the primary purposes of the study, the following two research objectives were formulated:

1. To determine the construct validity of the Professional Identity Questionnaire (PIQ) utilising exploratory factor analysis (EFA).
2. To determine the level of professional identity among faculty members employed by higher education institutions in Jordan.

Research methods and procedures
Participants
The study participants consisted of 551 faculty members from three universities in Jordan. The sample distribution was 323 males (58.6%) and 228 females (41.4%). There were 116 (21.1%) professors, 193 (35.0%) associate professors and 242 (43.9%) assistant professors. Of those, there were 310 (56.3%) from the Social Science faculties and 241 (43.7%) from the Science faculties. With regard to years of teaching experience of faculty members, 147 (26.7%) had experience of less than...
five years, 211 (38.3%) had experience of between five and nine years and 193 (35.0%) had experience above nine years.

**Instrumentation**

The instrument of the study was developed by the researchers after an extensive review of theory and research related to the fields of identity and professional identity. The researchers drafted a pool of 58 items, which were submitted to 10 content judges (university faculty members) for review and to determine the face and content validity of the items. These judges had expertise in the areas of research design, survey design and higher education. The researchers instructed this panel to check the instrument items for clarity, length, time to complete, difficulty in understanding and answering questions, flow of questions, appropriateness of questions based on the research topic, any recommendations for revising the survey questions (e.g., add or delete) and overall utility of the instrument. Based on their feedback, items were dropped and reworded where necessary. At this stage, the 58 items were revised to 40 items. This preliminary questionnaire was pilot tested with a group of 30 faculty members selected randomly from the four universities who were not included in the final sample of the study. This stage led to the additional dropping of 15 items and rewording of several items. All items in the instrument used a five-point Likert-type scale with values ranging as follows: 1 = ‘Strongly disagree’, 2 = ‘Disagree’, 3 = ‘Neutral’, 4 = ‘Agree’, 5 = ‘Strongly agree’.

The final instrument was named the Professional Identity Questionnaire and consisted of two sections, one of which was a demographic section (details not shown). The next section of the instrument consisted of 24 items, provided in Table 1. The internal consistency coefficient for the instrument was calculated using Cronbach’s alpha and found to be 0.83. Therefore, the instrument is regarded as a reliable measure of professional identity in higher education settings based on the perceptions of university faculty members.

**Data collection**

Data were collected from faculty members during the first semester of the academic year 2010/2011. The researchers contacted the selected faculty members within each university included in the sample either in person or by telephone, explained the nature and goals of the study and ensured confidentiality, voluntaries and anonymity. The participants were also informed that the instrument would take less than 15 minutes to complete. This process took two months of the researchers’ time. The faculty members who agreed to participate in the study were given the instrument and requested to complete it within two weeks. At the end of the two weeks, the researchers collected the instruments.

**Data analysis**

To answer the first research objective, exploratory factor analysis was used. Exploratory factor analysis is primarily used in the early stages of instrument development, when researchers are trying to determine the underlying structure of the instrument. Factor analysis is a multivariate statistical technique used to examine the intercorrelations among a large set of variables and then attempt to find a smaller
The objective of EFA is to ‘reduce the number of dimensions necessary to describe the relationships among the variables’ (Gardner 2001, 243). In other words, EFA will uncover the underlying structure of the PIQ, thereby allowing understanding of the simple structure of the measuring instrument. The overall measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) for the whole data set was used to determine the appropriateness of factor analysis. Hair et al. (1998) suggested values above 0.90 to be excellent, while values below 0.60 should be deemed unacceptable.

When determining the number of factors to extract, the visual scree plot and an eigenvalue greater than or equal to one are used (Benson and Nasser 1998). An eigenvalue represents the total variance explained by the factor (Benson and Nasser 1998). Moreover, visual scree plots were consulted to determine the number of constructs that still capture those relationships (Ary, Jacob, and Razavieh 1996; Benson and Nasser 1998).

Table 1. Items of the Professional Identity Questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work-based dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) I am actively involved in the university curriculum decisions (planning, designing, leading and controlling).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) I am committed to the university mission, vision and goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) I have a thorough understanding of university policies and procedures.</td>
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<td>(4) I maintain updated knowledge about current educational policies.</td>
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<td>(5) I establish an effective support network for students.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Student-based dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) I create and maintain a flexible and harmonious learning environment for my students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) I help students apply what they have learned to their daily work life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) I establish a trusting and caring relationship with my students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) My students regard me a role model because of my positive social values and my concern for local and global issues.</td>
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<td>(5) I find satisfaction supporting lifelong learning of students.</td>
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<td>(6) I tailor my teaching to fit the needs, interests, and abilities of my students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) I discuss the progress of my students with colleagues.</td>
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<th>Self-based dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) I am committed and dedicated to the profession.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) I have a strong passion for teaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) I enjoy sharing my ideas and experiences with other faculty members in the field.</td>
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<td>(4) I can only see my self as a faculty member working in a university setting.</td>
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<td>(5) I enjoy the social recognition I get as a faculty member.</td>
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<td>(6) My students and colleagues regard me as an effective faculty member.</td>
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<td>(7) I promote harmonious and collaborative staff relationships to enhancing the quality of work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8) I feel part of a community of teachers.</td>
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<th>Skill-based dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) I have passion for continuous learning and excellence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) It is important to me to develop my knowledge and teaching skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) I demonstrate strong ongoing personal and professional growth.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) I would like to be a more knowledgeable and skilful faculty member.</td>
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factors to extract. Once the factors have been extracted, the next step is to rotate them as an aid in the interpretation of those factors. The main goal behind factor rotation is to produce a simple structure (Gorsuch 1997) where each variable has the highest loading on its major factor and the lowest loading on the remaining factors. Because the latent constructs in this study were expected to be correlated, a restriction placed on factors by orthogonal rotation, oblique rotation with direct oblimin was performed. With oblique rotation, the factor pattern matrix was used because the values are, ‘standardised regression weights (betas) reflecting the relationship between the variable and a factor, after partialling out the relationship between the variable and the remaining factors’ (Benson and Nasser 1998, 27). The pattern matrix is more appropriate to examine than the structure matrix because ‘we are interested in the unique variance accounted for by each factor’ (Morgan and Casper 2000, 310). Finally, items were considered for retention on factors when they had a loading value above 0.30.

To achieve the second research objective, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were utilised. The mean value indicates the average response of participants for each sub-scale, whereas the standard deviation indicates the deviation of the mean values from the standard (average). In this study, what we wanted was higher mean values and lower standard deviations.

Results

The data collected from all participants were coded, entered into the SPSS spreadsheets and analysed using the software package SPSS version 17.0. Descriptive statistics for all variables in this study were examined using SPSS frequencies. The minimum and maximum values of each variable were examined for the accuracy of data entry by inspecting out-of-range values. An examination of these values did not detect any out-of-range values.

Results pertaining to Research objective 1

Principal axis factoring and oblique rotation method were used to uncover the underlying structure of the PIQ. Before conducting exploratory factor analysis, the data were screened in several ways to ensure their normality and appropriateness for factor analysis. With respect to normality, visual inspection of the histogram, mean, median, mode, skewness and kurtosis for each item and for the whole data showed that the data were normally distributed. With regard to the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis, two statistical tests (overall MSA and the Bartlett Test of Sphericity) were conducted. The results of the MSA (0.94) and the Bartlett Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.05$) indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

Exploratory factor analysis procedures were completed for the purpose of identifying the latent constructs underlying the data. The criteria for determining how many factors to extract included the eigenvalue greater than one rule and a visual inspection of the scree plot (Ary, Jacob, and Razavieh 1996). The initial analysis was run without specifying how many factors to retain. This procedure resulted in four factors, explaining 64.67% of the common variance (see Table 2). These factors are described as follows: (1) self-related identity – this factor included nine items, with a reliability estimate of 0.94, and accounted for approximately 39% of the total variance. It included items such as ‘I have a strong passion for teaching’;
(2) student-related identity – this factor included seven items, with a reliability estimate of 0.92 and accounted for almost 13% of the total variance. It included items such as ‘I establish a trusting and caring relationship with my students’; (3) work-related identity – this factor included five items, with a reliability estimate of 0.91, and accounted for almost 9% of the total variance. It included items such as ‘I am committed to the university mission, vision and goals’; and (4) skill-related identity – this factor included four items, with a reliability estimate of 0.89, and accounted for almost 4% of the total variance. It included items such as ‘I have passion for continuous learning and excellence’.

The pattern matrix was chosen to examine the data instead of the structure matrix because in using the oblique rotation method we are interested in the unique variance accounted for by each factor. Also, because the pattern matrix yields partial weights, the values in this matrix are more appropriate to interpret (Hair et al. 1998). Using these criteria, all 25 items were retained on the PIQ. In brief, the loading of items was characterised by an interpretable simple structure, meaning that they had high loadings on the major factor and low cross-loadings on the other factors. All factors have acceptable reliabilities as estimated by Cronbach’s Alpha, which range from 0.89 to 0.94.

Results pertaining to Research objective 2
Research objective 2 was accomplished utilising descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations. As shown in Table 3, the mean value for the self-related identity factor is higher than all other means, whereas the student-related identity has the lowest mean value. The results also indicated that faculty members have high levels of professional identity on two factors, a moderate level of professional identity on one factor and a low level of professional identity on one factor.
Discussion

Professional identity of educators is a new area of research inquiry, especially in higher education contexts. Previous research has focused on the identity and professional identity of teachers and pre-service teachers, and none of this research was conducted on higher education samples of faculty members. Further, research is lacking a well-developed instrument to measure the professional identity of faculty members at higher education institutions worldwide, especially in Jordan.

With regard to the professional identity of faculty members, the results of this study indicate that all faculty members under study had high levels of self-related identity, where they were committed and dedicated to their profession, they had a strong passion for teaching, enjoyed sharing ideas and experiences with other faculty members in the field, only saw themselves as faculty members working in a university setting, enjoyed the social recognition they get as faculty members, and promoted harmonious and collaborative staff relationships to enhance the quality of work. Moreover, faculty members had high levels of skill-related identity, which is evident by the fact that they had a passion for continuous learning and excellence, sought out opportunities to develop their knowledge and teaching skills, demonstrated strong ongoing personal and professional growth and would have liked to have been more knowledgeable and skillful faculty members. These results are supported by the finding that a well-developed educator’s identity would confer strong resilience among practising teachers, leading to satisfaction and effectiveness in sustaining and developing their profession (Henderson and Braden 2008; Proweller and Mitchener 2004). These results are an indication of the commitment of educators to their professional practices, which is an important part of professional identity (Enyedy, Goldberg, and Welsh 2006).

By the same token, faculty members exhibited moderate levels of work-related identity related to their involvement in the university curriculum decisions (planning, designing, leading and controlling), their commitment to the university mission, vision and goals, their understanding of university policies and procedures and to maintaining updated knowledge about current educational policies. This moderate level may be attributed to lack of effort on faculty members’ part to pursue these areas. It is important to note that the university system plays an essential role in constructing the professional identity of educators (Danielewicz 2001), because it is the most influential as a position authorised by the rules, laws, traditions and principles of the university (Gee 2001).

However, faculty members exhibited low levels of student-related identity related to creating and maintaining a flexible and harmonious learning environment for students, helping students apply what they have learned to their daily work life,
establishing trusting and caring relationships with students, supporting lifelong learning of students, tailoring teaching to fit the needs, interests and abilities of students and discussing the progress of students with colleagues. It is speculated that the culture of bureaucracy is still dominating in the three universities under study, where a teacher-centred approach seems to prevail. This notion is supported by Helms (1998), who noted that professional identity of educators can be influenced by society and culture.

Conclusion
In conclusion, this study represents one of the few efforts to develop a multidimensional instrument more precisely measuring the constructs of professional identity in higher education settings with appropriate psychometric properties. This study contributes to the literature by providing a precise measurement of professional identity of faculty members in a university system and providing strong evidence for its construct validity. This questionnaire is particularly relevant for use in higher education institutions given its length (24 items) and the short time required to complete it (less than 15 minutes). Good organisational measures not only must be valid and reliable but also need practicality (i.e., they should be easy to administer and interpret) (Cooper and Schindler 2003). So, the PIQ is a valuable and promising new instrument that can be used by researchers and practitioners to provide a quick overall picture of the status of professional identity and enable timely interventions to enhance individual and organisational performance. This study also sheds light on the level of professional identity for faculty members employed by higher education institutions in Jordan, an under-researched group.

It is clear that further refinement of the PIQ is needed. Future studies may consider incorporating additional items. Further studies are needed to validate the scale dimensions with private sector organisations and populations (e.g., administrative employees). More studies are also needed to cross-validate the instrument with different cultures and nationalities to firmly establish its utility and validity. Although further research and development directed at improving the psychometric qualities of the PIQ is warranted, this research suggests that the PIQ may offer considerable benefit to higher education institutions’ practice and research in Jordan. From a research standpoint, this investigation is important because it represents an important effort to draw attention to the importance of professional identity research in Jordan and open up new avenues of investigation. Also, this research represents an important effort to disseminate and share important tools and expertise across geographic and cultural boundaries. Further, an important area of future research should focus on the development of a path model, where the work-related identity affects skill-related identity, self-related identity and student-related identity.

From the practical standpoint, the ability of Jordanian higher education institutions to use the PIQ effectively can reap many benefits for the growth, development and sustainability of these organisations as well as for the economic growth of the whole nation. Such combined efforts can contribute greatly to the economic growth of the nation as a whole by developing and nurturing the expertise and competencies of the national workforce. Moreover, there are areas of concern to which university administrators should give close attention. First, it should be the norm to involve faculty members in presidency managerial functions including planning, designing,
leading and controlling to instil commitment toward university goals, visions, policies and procedures.

Further, there is a need to develop the identity of faculty members in relation to their students, which is a precursor for institutional success. For instance, policies should be issued by the university system in Jordan to encourage faculty members to move away from the traditional teaching-learning process toward more real-life, hands-on experiences. This can be accomplished through increasing student representation on working groups, training workshops, committees and governance bodies, and frequent employment in the local community. Consideration needs to be given to changing the whole university environment to emphasise a flexible and harmonious learning environment characterised by trusting and caring relationships, lifelong learning and individualised learning.

Finally, this research is considered a foundation for university development locally and elsewhere. Professional identity is an important area of inquiry since it touches bases on the two key players, the instructor and the student, that are needed to develop the educational system of higher education. Understanding the key dimensions of professional identity of faculty members, and intervening in time to facilitate them and remove obstacles in their way, will eventually lead to higher learning and achievement for the key stakeholders involved in higher education. This is needed especially in today’s fluctuating global world, where university faculty members are regarded as the key competitive edge necessary for institutional survival and success.

Notes on contributors
Jamal Abu-Alruz is an associate professor of science education at the Hashemite University in Jordan. His research interests are in the areas of faculty development, science inquiry, and sustainable development practices.

Samer Khasawneh holds a Ph.D. in Human Resource Development. His research interests are in the areas of workforce development, human resource management, international development, and leadership development.

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