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Introduction

Between 24th June and the 24th July 2018 focus group data was collected from 15 participants, all of whom were at advanced stages in their academic careers. These individuals were surveyed in order to address the first aim of COST Action 15221 – namely to "classify, as 'frontier taxonomies', the common ground in terms of shared purposes, processes, knowledge, values and skills among centralized institutional supports for research, writing, teaching and learning in order to capitalise on their synergies". The aim of this particular STSM is to identify and thematically map the processes, values, knowledge and skills of successful academics working in higher education. This qualitative data is produced with the ultimate aim of identifying and advancing effective institutional models towards cohesive teaching, learning, research and writing development.

The purpose of this document is to report the thematic analysis of the focus group data which was conducted using the model described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The document is intended largely for an internal audience i.e. members of COST Action 15221. Because the analysis was completed as part of a Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) it is limited by what could be achieved within that time frame. However, given the amount of data and the initial work carried out by this Action's Management Committee and as part of the Action's Autumn 2018 Training School, it has been possible to provide a comprehensive report that will be contribute to the project. The methodology applied can be described as an inductive thematic analysis which searches for latent themes. Because of the blended form of the raw data, which frequently crosses into all of the four areas, it was decided that a theoretical thematic analysis was not the most productive approach at this juncture. Also, given the fairly self-evident nature of the data, I decided against pursuing a semantic thematic analysis. However, in practice the latent analysis will include semantic analysis as the "separation between semantic and latent codes is not pure; in practice codes can and do have both elements" (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The facilitators of the focus groups adopted a methodology which involved asking five key questions:

1. What has been the single most important factor that has contributed to your success as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?
2. What have you found most difficult in your career to date and how have you managed that challenge?
3. What habits or what about your disposition contributes most to your success? 4. What do you want to do next and what (besides more time and resources) would help you to achieve that goal?
5. What advice would you give to an early career colleague hoping to succeed as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?

Due to the open nature of these questions, the broad disciplinary backgrounds of the participants and the diversity of the focus groups, the raw data produced varied widely. Despite this, themes were identified, both in relation to the individual questions and across the range of the questions. Due to the similarity of the data produced in response to all the questions, I decided to code and analyse the data collectively.

Participants often reported similar values, processes, skills, knowledge and challenges across all of the focus groups and there was also much agreement between participants in individual focus groups. The often-fragmented nature of academic work practices aside, a comprehensive map of the experiences of academics and the components of academic success was possible, despite the diversity of the participants. However, the need to address key challenges was present from the outset. The participants themselves struggled with the fragmented nature of their work and appeared to have little time to reflect on the holistic nature of their careers as academics. Further to this, the multifaceted nature of academic work demands an onerous level of adaptability and commitment. Participants reported having to

adopt often contradictory personality traits that would require them to be introverted and extraverted, creative and rational, competitive and empathetic, reflective and single-minded, as well as being adaptable and assertive. The ideal personality of a successful academic formed a major theme in the focus groups and will be discussed in relation to "the big five" personality traits. At this juncture, it is of interest to note that participants appear to be high in openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. The final trait is the only negative attribute that was reported consistently and seems to be a result of the diverse challenges that form part of an academic career.

The structure of academic institutions, rather than consistently providing participants with support, frequently created barriers and challenges that participants would spend a great degree of time circumventing and transcending. Due to the fragmented nature of their work, many candidates reported an inability to focus deeply on their research and spoke of a desire for more sabbatical time. Institutional and social factors formed a theme and overcoming challenges in these areas involved developing important skills. Some participants described diverse challenges that affected them throughout their career. In their early careers, some academics reported specific challenges that starkly contrasted, though related to, later challenges. In regards to time management, for instance, early career academics found it difficult to manage their time as they had so much free time, while senior academics struggled with time management due to a lack of free time. Loneliness and isolation were also a feature from their experience as early career academics, while all participants highlighted the benefits of collaboration. Time management and the ability to collaborate were important factors in another major theme: processes, knowledge and skills.

While freedom was reported as a cherished commodity, this freedom may also entail being free from the rigidity that would be imposed by the expansion of further institutional integration and support. A further difficulty arose, specific to early career academics, where they may be too isolated from the institution or unaware of available supports, to ask for the help they need. Effective communication within the institution, as a feature relevant to the social aspect of academic work, would be a pillar of an successful institutional model. As institutions evolve they must communicate such advances and changes, but they must also evolve in correspondence with advances occurring within disciplines by recognizing and valuing movements towards interdisciplinarity and innovation in research, teaching, learning and writing. Consequently, participants agreed about the values and purposes of an ideal academic which would also comprise those of an ideal institution. Values such; as being student centred, being respectful and helpful towards one's colleagues and fellow academics, as well as being committed to social justice, equality, fairness, honesty, integrity and the dissemination of knowledge, formed part of an ideal academic community. Values and purposes are the final major theme of this thematic analysis and reflect, as a collective ethos, a merging of the personal and institutional along with the intersection of knowledge and practice.

Findings
- Academic success is composite in nature and the most important attributes of a successful academic are adaptability and dynamism.
- A specific, ideal academic personality was reported that was open, conscientious, extraverted and agreeable.
- Candidates frequently reported neurotic responses to the stresses of academic life, which can be identified as the major challenge they face.
- The stresses of academic life were also composite in nature and reflect the dynamism and commitment required to succeed.
- Candidates identified the importance of institutional and social factors in their success, while also identifying how overcoming challenges in these areas help them develop important skills.

- The development of skills across the four areas was often reported as developing out of the participants' own initiatives, especially in the area of writing, highlighting the importance of the academic personality and, conversely, a lack of cohesive support throughout the various stages of an academic career.
- Candidates identified and agreed upon specific skills, such as time management and leadership, that were important for success.
- Candidates identified specific values and purposes, such as being student-centred and committed to social justice, that ultimately reflected both the values of an ideal academic and institution.

Latent Thematic Analysis

Theme One: The Academic Personality

The Composite Nature of Academic Success
The first question asked of the focus groups was, "What has been the single most important factor that has contributed to your success as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?" Four focus group participants mentioned the difficulty of isolating one single factor, highlighting the composite nature of academic success across all four areas:

> *I think it is important to underline that it was not one single factor that*
> *influenced my journey to become an educator, and teacher or ... researcher*
> *... in the field of adult and lifelong learning.*
> (Focus Group 1, 24/06/2018)

The composite nature of academic success became the jumping off point for a wide ranging discussion of the various factors that influenced the participants' career development. These factors fall under the themes of personal traits and institutional factors.

Personal Traits
Particular personal traits were identified by participants throughout the focus groups. An interest and proficiency in the field as well as an enjoyment of academic work was deemed an important component of success: "*the most important factor is pleasure*" (Focus Group 2, 29/06/2018) . Pleasure is connected to interest:

> *So for me the single most important factor for learning, writing, teaching*
> *and researching is to have an interest, an actual interest, in the subject that*
> *I'm teaching, learning and writing about, or researching.*
> (Focus Group 2, 29/06/2018)

Curiosity is also connected to this:

> *Because I was always curious to learn more, to be better in teaching, to do*
> *more research et cetera. I would say, this was the... the main factor.*
> (Focus Group 3, 23/07/2018)

A genuine interest in their field was considered a key factor by many participants and this was a component of the resilience needed to thrive in such a challenging sector: *what drives me on is I suppose I'm curious about things I'm interested in things ah I want to find out more about things so that would be my background.*
> (Focus Group 6, 25/06/2018)

Perseverance is highlighted as an important personality trait:

> *it's a little bit of perseverance, in the sense that, in all the fields that I've had*
> *some success, either research, teaching, or university management, the fact*
> *that I really hate giving up and accepting defeat, and I keep working and*
> *working and working, until I, at some point if it doesn't work obviously I leave*

things, but that fact has probably been the most important one.
(Focus Group 5, 25/06/2018)

Resilience is also accompanied by optimism:

what characterises me maybe or what is one of my obsessions or traits that probably is the driving force for me to go further is my incurable optimism maybe that things may be done. It is my incurable optimism and positivism that things can change...
(Focus Group 1, 24/06/2018)

Candidates also highlighted the need for "*a strong will*" and "*some ambition… because without ambition I don't think that you can manage all that all the things we have to manage*" (Focus Group 2, 29/06/2018). Pleasure, curiosity and interest help foster the perseverance, resilience and optimism needed to survive in academia. This complex of perseverance, interest and curiosity is an important component of conscientiousness forms part of the academic personality. Conscientiousness also connects to skills that were identified as important throughout the focus groups such as time management and leadership. However, these skills were often honed through the endeavour of the participants, rather than fostered by institutional supports, again underlining the need for academics to be resilient and conscientious self starters. In turn, this need for conscientious and resilience as a prerequisite for academic success may be a barrier to those who do not already possess these characteristics. The prevalence of a particular academic personality that is bound to succeed, while a highly dynamic type, perhaps leads to homogeneity in academia. Further to this, conscientious and openness, or creativity, often oppose each other as personality traits.

Openness and Creativity

Another personal characteristic deemed to be highly important by a number of participants was openness. This extended to openness to other disciplines, fields and cultures (Focus Group 1), to the perspectives of students (Focus Group 3), to criticism (Focus Group 4, 24/07/2018), and to research projects and collaboration (Focus Group 6). Creativity, which is connected to openness, is also highly valued. Possessing an imagination and pursuing innovation were cited as desirable traits by a number of participants. Creativity is also tied to problem solving[1] and resilience: "*crises are the most provocative because they trigger mechanisms for inventions, they trigger mechanisms for moving forward*" (Focus Group 1). Necessity being the mother of invention, creativity intersected different areas of academic life, including teaching[2] and research[3]. One candidate mentioned a particular form of creativity, "*rational creativity*", which connects to a latent theme that permeates the data: the composite nature of academic success (Focus Group 2).

One would assume that methodical focus would be more generally associated with academic success than creativity, yet there was far more focus on the importance of openness

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[1] "*being imaginative in addressing any problem is probably what can be the best answer*" (Focus Group 5).

[2] "*I think one of my habits what contributes most to my career especially in teaching was to follow creative or innovative impulses and stay with them. I had some ideas and then I stayed with them*" (Focus Group 2).

[3] "*So my goal as a team member is to find innovations and bring them to my team. And I think this is the perspective feature of me, for team working. So that's why I was requested. I can share my knowledge and I like to do it, to teach others, to bring them using—how to say—innovations, new solutions. I don't want to repeat old things. I am looking for a new approach. I would like to construct*" (Focus Group 5).

and creativity than on logic and reason throughout the focus group sessions. While the term "*rational creativity*" reconnects academic activity with activities associated with the left brain, such as logic and rationality, creativity generally involves a whole brain approach, for example we can see this through the necessity for organising, structuring, drafting, editing and proofreading in writing. The latent theme or personal attribute of dynamism is reflected in the term "rational creativity" and also connects with the theme of lifelong learning in regards to which candidates identified the need for continuous personal reinvention and evolution. However, while the ideal academic may be perfectly balanced, between rationality and creativity for instance, individuals, thankfully, will have different strengths and weaknesses.

The characteristics of adaptability and dynamism may become an institutional value through supporting diversity, including diversity in talents, skills and abilities. Career development and supports for academics may benefit from catering more for these differences, allowing academics to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and training them according to their needs, rather than adopting a generic approach. The "*joy of sharing*" and the desirability of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, openness and creativity could be jumping off points for providing innovative supports and services that intersect the various departments and sectors in institutes of higher learning (Focus Group 1).

In response to question four candidates spoke of the directions they would like to take in the future. New directions for candidates often involved new research projects as well as creating new educational programs:

> *next October I will have another work as a director of a postgraduate school*
> *which is not any more managerial role is more an entrepreneurial role*
> *because the goals that was not yet set…* (Focus Group 2).

Another candidate spoke of a desire to work outside the university, specifically in the area of frontline research, but also hoped that she could continue to teach, again speaking to the composite nature of academic life and the desire for institutional flexibility and freedom on the part of candidates (Focus Group 2). Freedom, in terms of research, writing and teaching, was recognized as an important commodity, particularly by participants in Focus Group 2. Openness, freedom, creative flexibility and dynamism were not just seen as desirable in terms of the personality of academics but also in regards to the structures, supports and values of institutions.

Advice about how to be as an early career academic – given in response to question five – spoke of the importance of openness and exploration, enjoyment, interest and proficiency. These themes were already present in response to earlier questions and the responses here often reiterated earlier sentiments. Openness and exploration were discussed in terms of a holistic approach to life – "*get their backpack and go to find the world… delve into other explorations, spiritual explorations*" – and the need to constantly question our assumptions – *"understand that we are not free and we are not free from preconceptions and we are not free from imposing by the western civilisations"* (Focus Group 1). Enjoyment, interest and proficiency were deemed essential for early career success, along with confirming to oneself that one wants to be a researcher. This is required as a component of the resilience necessary to survive and thrive in the world of academia. However, some spoke of the psychological pitfalls of academic life, often in relation to the difficulties faced by early career academics.

Neuroticism
Personal issues that candidates reported often referred to their experience as early career investigators. One respondent reported how she faced many challenges as an ECI, "*feeling lonely*" when working from home and having to avail of "*psychotherapy*" and "*yoga groups*" (Focus Group 2). Eventually she found a better flow, in terms of time management and the writing of her PhD, through speaking with her colleagues, reiterating the need for social support, especially for early career academics. Another respondent reported, from the other side of the power dynamic, how she would support post-graduates through continued

involvement in their learning and by facilitating them in the creation of knowledge. She reported the benefits of co-writing articles with students, emphasizing the "*link between research and teaching*" (Focus Group 3). The importance of building synergies across the four areas was part of her ethos as an educator and researcher and she appeared passionately aware of the importance of blurring the boundaries between research, writing, teaching and learning.

Another respondent reported lacking confidence initially as a researcher and the difficulty of dealing with negative feedback and also how this was necessary for her development, underlining the need for resilience as one progresses through a career in academia (Focus Group 6). Some practical considerations, especially concerning finding work, were reported in relation to early career development. Early career academics must cope with the precarious nature of "*temporary contracts*" and, later, the difficulty of gaining promotion (Focus Group 6).

Extraversion and Agreeableness: Institutional and *Social Factors*
In relation to the social aspects of academic success, the importance of collaboration and developing a network was mentioned many times throughout the focus groups, both in relation to the first question and the other questions posed. Good relationships, social interaction, feedback, engagement, communication, mentorship, collegiality as well as institutional and social support were consistently mentioned in relation to success across the four areas. One candidate mentioned the relationship between perseverance and social factors which spoke of a need for balance between collegiality and personal ambition:

> *some ambition is necessary... but too much ambition is ... is I think it's negative because when you are too ambitious you walk ... you step on people and I hate that* (Focus Group 2).

Again, this speaks to the composite nature of academic work and the need for balance between competing and sometimes contradictory aims. One candidate emphasized how their philosophy of viewing knowledge as a social product, produced as part of community, helped them achieve success in academia across the four areas, underlining the importance of collaboration as part of a system of values (Focus Group 3).

An area related to collaboration and networking is mobility. Participants mentioned the value of working outside of academia, training abroad and their involvement with international platforms and projects. One participant identified mobility as the single most important factor for success, particularly in regards to research (Focus Group 1). Another participant mentioned how mobility, along with working in different institutions in collaboration with different colleagues, added value to their research by introducing them to different methodologies (Focus Group 2).

In response to question four, candidates spoke of the help they required to pursue their goals. However, these responses varied. There was a prevalent desire for institutions to further support collaboration, international research and mobility. Another candidate wanted "*a better balance between my academic area and my family life*" suggesting better institutional support in this area is required (Focus Group 1). A need for better internal communication and improvements to institutional structure were voiced so that academic staff would be more aware of how institutions may develop and evolve. One candidate spoke of the desire for more stability in her department:

> *what I would like to have is a stable staff. I have a secretary and tutors. I have some times young people who do research with me but it would be better to have a structure in order to help the structure grow and so have people working with me in order to achieve these goals that I can foresee but that I'm still not sure I can achieve this...* (Focus Group 2)

Candidates also spoke of the need for better centralized supports, including "*technical support,*

resources", "*teaching and learning support*" and writing support (including second language support) (Focus Group 2 and 3). The flexibility required of academics should also be required of institutional supports in order to better enable academics to achieve their goals across the four areas and in administration, management and leadership.

Negotiating the university system presented as a specific challenge. The rigidity and conservatism of university culture saw one respondent report the difficulty of coping with limited "*academic structures*" that simply did not recognize certain disciplines, thereby keeping them marginal (Focus Group 1). Furthermore, pioneering new fields presented both challenges and opportunities to respondents. A number of candidates spoke of a lack of recognition for new fields, " like writing pedagogy in higher education - or now creative writing" (Focus Group 4). However, discovering new fields also presented opportunities for advancement within academia:

> *part of the success is to be able to identify new fields, new paths of research*
> *[but there] also lies dangers of course. Um so it is partly a challenge and*
> *partly an opportunity. It is both things at the same time* (Focus Group 4).

Academic freedom, which is highly valued by most candidates, presents pitfalls, especially when moving into new and innovative areas of research or when working in areas that are perceived as not possessing the same gravitas as more established fields. Difficulties in communication and the transfer of knowledge in regards to all of the four areas also presented as an issue:

> *the biggest challenge is communication with different people, different*
> *characters especially in environment in developing countries where*
> *sometimes people are the institution* (Focus Group 1).

Another respondent reported a difficulty in terms of university culture and recognition in relation to promotion:

> *promotion… I found very difficult and trying to understand all of that and*
> *trying to get through that. Mm balancing what to prioritize* (Focus Group 6).

Despite much criticism of institutions, some candidates identified the importance of their institution in regards to their success. In advice to early career academics, networking and building a social support system were recommended. In terms of networking and collaboration, one candidate identified the importance of her institution:

if I need to choose one single factor it will be my institution, its international recognition, involvement in projects and possibility for mobility (Focus Group 1).

Another candidate identified the importance of conferences and publications in regards to succeeding as a member of your discipline's culture:

> *you need to go to conferences, you need to be asked for evaluating articles, to*
> *be in the scientific committee of conferences and things like that …* (Focus
> Group 2).

Another candidate reiterated this:

> *go to international conferences, to summer schools, to, you know, meet*
> *people, to interact with people, and to learn…* (Focus Group 3).

Publishing is regarded as a specific means to success in academia and a key component of academic culture:

> *as an early student, a young student, you need to be more careful about this*
> *thing and you really need to think about what you want your career to be, you*
> *need to worry about what people will use to evaluate your success, which are,*
> *you know, basically publications, in most cases* (Focus Group 5).

While freedom and innovation where valued, so were agreeableness, which relates to the social and cultural aspect of academic success. Fitting in with the culture was a latent value, though one perhaps at odds with a desire for creativity and invention. One candidate advised young academics to seek guidance in terms of innovation in their field:

Ask experienced researchers and teachers, what they think is going to
happen in that field within the next ten years (Focus Group 4).
Another advised being agreeable and available as a strategy for success: *I would say*
yes to everything. There comes a point where you have to say no but I've
always said yes to everything and it has led to interesting things some of
[them] are dead ends and you say okay I'll get out of that but most stuff has
been good (Focus Group 6).
The personal traits of agreeableness and extraversion leads to another major theme of this
analysis which relates to the values and purposes of academic success, in terms of the individual
academic, their institution and the wider world.

Theme Two: Values and Purposes
The values which contributed to a candidate's success included: respect for both colleagues
and students, as well as equality, fairness, honesty, responsibility along with a willingness to
sacrifice one's time. One candidate spoke of the importance of social responsibility in regards
to his research and also focused on realising "how to help the other" (Focus Group 1). This
candidate also spoke of a responsibility to stay open to the world and to "*to the other*
disciplinary areas" calling back to the earlier theme of openness. Another candidate from this
group spoke of this need for openness in regards to the blurring of teaching and research: *I*
am more conscious of teaching that, to my students, not to be numb and get into the trap of
being of … the new way of living which is very neoliberal way of living and promoting
somebody's career and of promoting your discipline etc. etc. And step back a little bit and
hear the sounds and smell… what's happening around you in order to utter new voices of
resistances.
One candidate reiterated the need to be open and fair as a teacher, researcher and manager,
particularly in regards to students:
I also think that…the benevolence in your job is very important because we
are not only researchers we are teachers we are managers and it is very
important to be geared positively toward our students I think it is very
important to like our students to like young people to want to help them make
progress and with colleagues is very important to have a positive attitude…
(Focus Group 2).

Another candidate spoke in similar terms in regards to her teaching:
they are students who have come from different backgrounds. Then we start
talking about their experience. And then we come into the law. I think that
really has been one of my signature styles, if you like. And students have
always responded to it. Because it brings in the human aspect, it links the
subject to their own lives, and it generates interest. And my approach has
always been, if I have awakened interest in you, then you are really going to
do the research and you are really going to do the learning. I don't have to
do anything more after that (Focus Group 3).

This respondent also spoke of her role as teacher and social activist and how these
intersected: *I mean and I talked to you earlier about social movements and I am I am*
you know involved with social movements, I have been human rights activist, so I am
in the position to bring all that into the classroom… And the second I come I say let's
look at international law from third world perspectives. So that completely helps,
instead of telling them you should critically engage with the subject, I tell them how
do you critically engage with the subject – this is how you do it, look at it from, you
know, African perspective, look at it from Latin American perspective and you will
see it's a very different international law. So students actually get to, you know, they

> *are not just lectured on being critical but they actually are given the tools on how to be critical.*

In relation to this, another desire that presented itself was to create environments for self, or lifelong learning "*where … people can find their own way, not to impose the ways*" (Focus Group 1). Openness in regards to teaching students was a common feature in the focus groups and candidates spoke of a need to disrupt the traditional, top-down approach to teaching. One candidate spoke of developing a course according to the needs of first years who are often ill prepared for university education, while the necessity of supporting students in their learning was also mentioned, evidencing a pervasive, student-centred ethos (Focus Group 3). The importance of values and ethics interfaced with and counterbalanced ambition in regards to research and career advancement, especially in institutions which suffer from asymmetries of power:

> *I try to really focus on integrity and to be a person I would really like people to say that's a person of integrity that's a person who is respectful who respects other people that's a person who values other people who doesn't think they know it all and who can value everyone in the organization so I really try to be in my dealings with everyone, students, support staff, academics whatever to be very equal. I'm very passionate about equality…*
> *So I think you know universities are very mm in terms of power relations very asymmetrical so there are hierarchies although some of them are kind of more visible than others there are mm also mm you know we have a university that doesn't really mm reflect our surrounding area mm either in staff or in students so it's still a very privileged place to work and only slowly but surely is that kind of changing I guess so eh then I mean there are gender issues around equality as well but it's not just gender there are other issues as well but I think I am genuinely interested in that, committed to that and I hope that people see that, that's important to me and that I try to be fair and to treat people equally and equitably which are not always the same things* (Focus Group 6).

Academic honesty and generosity were also identified by one respondent as important components of academic integrity:

> *I would say that honesty, honesty in research is very important because other people can feel that you're not going to you know steal their research or you're not going be too competitive … eh … sharing is very important …. supporting younger colleagues you know helping them going to conferences supporting them I think it's what … eh … it's very important because you're not alone…*
> (Focus Group 2).

This collegial generosity and spirit of sharing leads into another important theme which permeates the data: collaboration. One candidate spoke of a development in his field, "*a new culture, of this joy of sharing*" (Focus Group 1). This subtheme of "*sharing*" blurs the lines of research, teaching, learning and writing and also speaks to an aforementioned desire for recognition by candidates. Facilitating a global and interdisciplinary approach through fostering dialogues across the borders that exist between nations and disciplines is an institutional practice that would support the "*exchange good ideas*" particularly in the field of education, which intersects all academic disciplines (Focus Group 1). The discipline of education and institutional supports in teaching, learning, research and writing are interdisciplinary nodes connecting other disciplines together and could potentially forge new fields in the form of interdisciplinary collaborations.

Collaboration, as one of the most prominent themes of the focus group discussions, appears to constitute much of the social and communicative network of academia. While a popular perception of academic life is that it is often isolated and lonesome, most respondents

cherished collaboration in all four areas:

> *Research, teaching, learning only works with communication, exchange, sharing. You need a Community… They see us as on our own working at home, mm, as lonely people. Well, I, I really think that team work is, is essential right… collaboration is very necessary. I couldn't manage without it* (Focus Group 4).

One respondent highlighted the need to interact with others:

> *Well, I would agree that interaction is really important. Because, you know, if you sit alone in your office or at home, you know, you're not going to get so much out of anything. So, you really need to interact with other people, with your students, with your colleague and it's, don't you know the synergy the eh the cooperation with the others what makes you better* (Focus Group 3).

Interaction with others, including staff and students, helps to connect academics with the realities of the world.

In regards to technology and its ability to facilitate interaction, it was viewed as a mixed blessing. One candidate commented on it positively:

> *You can interact with the people from all around the world with the technology, which you wouldn't be able to do without the technology. So, I would say that technology is good, if when we know how to use it to help us in our research and teaching* (Focus Group 3).

Another respondent in the same group emphasized how face to face interaction was central to teaching, learning and the production of knowledge:

> *It only comes out of social interactions. It is not something that I can sit in isolation and happen. And therefore for me it has always been about engagement with the students as a community, getting them to talk to each other, getting them to talk to me, I talk to them and I think talking is a much much… a central part of eh… the way I kind of approach my teaching. And which means, that I'm not as fascinated by technology as I'm actually fascinated by getting people to talk to each other.*

While certain values where explicitly articulated, especially in response to questions three and question five, some of the more interesting or complex data presented itself implicitly in the discussions. For instance, one candidate mentioned how a certain degree of luck was an important factor in academic success:

> *And there is something else which in my case has been very important which is to have a little bit of luck I would say. Luck is very important sometimes right* (Focus Group 4).

While luck presented as an issue, in tandem with some references to the importance of one's background, candidates did not report on the necessity of material and financial support in their early careers or as PhD students. However, one candidate did identify how writing and academic style, in tandem with economic disparity, constituted barriers for certain groups:

> *I am sure, it's not just that the black and ethnic minorities, it's also British working class students who come first generation to the university. You know, we can't tell them oh, you can speak English, go and write. They are not used to academic writing* (Focus Group 3).

While a number of female participants spoke of the difficulties of raising children while

pursuing an academic career [4] – a latent barrier to entry or advancement –none of the candidates cited financial problems, ethnicity or other socio-economic issues as barriers in academia. There may be a number of cultural or ethnographic reasons for this, in particular Western European mores about speaking about one's income or wealth. However, to return to the theme of openness, candidates in group one spoke of the importance of being open to the other, to other cultures and the significance of helping others and being sensitive to the other's needs, yet respondents did not directly comment on the barriers these cultural and social others may face when attempting to enter or succeed in academic careers. A consideration for further study may involve candidates disclosing their cultural, ethnic or economic background or being posed questions regarding such barriers in regards to career advancement in academia.

It is interesting to note that a certain degree of stoicism presented as a latent quality in candidate responses. A theme that arose from the challenges that respondents faced was lifelong learning, but from a negative perspective. One candidate mentioned the need to "*reinvent yourself*" as a challenge but also as a means to expose yourself "*to the other; to other cultures, to other disciplines, to other ways of thinking*" (Focus Group 1). Another spoke of a lack of "*formal training*", specifically in the area of writing, after she had finished her primary degree (Focus Group 4). Writing was spoken of often in terms of its distance and difference from the other three areas, suggesting that proficiency in writing was often something that just happened by accident or as part of an often disorganized process of lifelong learning. However, the haphazard nature of academic development was a theme in other areas, again emphasizing the earlier theme of luck:

> *I really wish that at that time we could have had the chance to at least know what everything was about. You know what I mean. Um so that was my biggest challenge. How, how did I overcome it? Just, just by reading, by learning by, by observing, by seeing how, I mean by looking for models right, by seeing how things are done in the right manner. So it has been as I said before trial and error all the time for me, for me and for us and for many people of my generation at that time* (Focus Group 4).

While this speaks to a certain lack in institutional supports, the need for lifelong learning also helped candidates cultivate crucial skills throughout their academic careers.

Theme Three: Processes, Knowledge and Skills
Lifelong Learning
The area of writing highlights some of the challenges that people face throughout academia, emphasising the need for lifelong learning. However, lifelong learning often appears to have occurred due to the diligence of the participants rather than as a result of institutional or social supports. Further to this, collaboration, while an important theme, was mentioned less in regards to writing. Greater facilitation of collaboration, particularly for early career academics, appears as a latent yet prominent desire of respondents across all the focus groups. While research, teaching and learning were seen as benefiting from collaborative initiatives, writing featured less prominently in regards to this. However, one candidate reported that writing her PhD became easier when she was able to discuss her work with colleagues (Focus Group 2). Another participant identified how writing was different to the other areas:

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[4] For example: "*But the same thing what I said about ethnic minorities also applies to women, you know, because many women students at university level, they have families, they have young children, they care for people in the family, and they they struggle a lot more to put themselves through education. We have to able to recognize that in some ways*" (Focus Group 3).

> *Teaching, learning and… research definitely. Writing is something else, I*
> *think, slightly more. It is a slightly different skill. Because writing is a skill*
> *as much as it is, you know, learning. Writing. So, I think it's a way of*
> *communicating and there are different issues in writing* (Focus Group 3). This
candidate emphasized the need for centralized writing support because of its distinction from
the other areas:

> *But writing… I think that's a different skill set and that requires, I think,*
> *centralized support in organizing it.*

This participant also emphasized a distinction between two different forms of writing
support:

> *Well we had here we do have centralized support for writing. Eh we have for*
> *example, you know, writing tutors and writing classes. Eh, but I think … the*
> *distinction between, you know, support for students, for whom English is a second*
> *language and support for academic writing generally… these are two different*
> *things. And I think we need to maybe tailor those services to both of*
> *these categories of students in very different ways. Because the problems are*
> *different.*

Despite the presence of writing support services, writing development was something that
appears to develop mostly independently of direct or formal training:

> *So basically this is something that is assumed that the students are going to*
> *learn during their studies even though there is no specific contents or any…*
> *centralized support* (Focus Group 3).

Developing skills in writing appears to occur as part of a prolonged process of lifelong learning,
but often not as part of any program of institutional support. This takes on a political dimension
in regards to an earlier comment made by a participant who indicated the need to support
underprivileged and marginalised groups in the area of writing in particular (Focus Group 3).
Improving writing support is an opportunity for institutions to actually address socio-economic
disparity in a manner that benefits students and teachers, as well as society. Lifelong learning
without institutional support represents a dividing line between the haves and have-nots,
whether it is in terms of one's personal traits or socio-economic background.

Candidates frequently emphasized the importance of lifelong learning as a component
of academic success. A desire to learn new things, to push outside one's comfort zone as well
as an ability to engage in self-reflection and self-criticism were seen as favourable attributes.
Again, lifelong learning is seen as something that is inherently challenging: "*So what is the*
most challenging, intriguing and most difficult? It's probably to reinvent yourself mainly"
(Focus Group 1). Lifelong learning connects with the four areas, branches into leadership and
administrative roles and is identified as something that blurs and crosses over in a holistic
manner: "*Learn from everything. Everything is a learning opportunity*" (Focus Group 3). A
positive attitude towards the prospect of lifelong learning is also regarded as a means to
overcome the various challenges academics face:

> *that was my biggest challenge. How, how did I overcome it? Just, just by reading,*
> *by learning by, by observing, by seeing how, I mean by looking for models right,*
> *by seeing how things are done in the right manner* (Focus Group 4).

Lifelong learning is attached to the personal quality of resilience. Being committed to
one's area of expertise, having faith that one can make a change, working hard and "*never*
giving up" lend themselves to successfully overcoming the myriad challenges that academic
life presents (Focus Group 4). However, resilience in academia suggests a certain lack of
institutional support across the four areas.

Time Management and Leadership
A feature which presented itself later in an academic's career was a lack of freedom,
specifically as one's responsibilities grew in areas such as teaching and administration. Time

management, especially in their later careers, presented serious challenges for candidates in regards to balancing all four areas along with administration work. Candidates found it difficult to prioritize due to fragmented work practices where the most pressing deadlines where often imposed in areas that least benefited their career advancement: again, administration work.

The multifaceted nature of academic life means that academics are frequently distracted and unable to engage in the deep, concentrated work that produces first rate research. The need for sabbaticals, both long term (one year out of every seven) and short term (one day a week), was expressed by many. As one participant reported:

> *it's the juggling of a variety of roles, really, that I find very challenging,*
> *especially with regards to getting time to do research* (Focus Group 2).

Despite the specificity of their expertise, participants found the variety of their roles challenging, suggesting a latent theme spoken about earlier: the composite or multifaceted nature of academic work. This theme became particularly evident in the area of time management as respondents reported how their professional lives would leech into their personal lives and this becomes a particular issue for mothers.

Responding to question three, candidates identified skills related to the theme of time management. Being able to "*work very quickly*", "*read very quickly*" and "*work… and produce things under pressure is very important*" (Focus Group 2). The frantic nature of academic life may not lend itself to "*rational creativity"* nor "*enjoyment*" and this again speaks to the need for resilience. Further to this, the stress of academia may affect how one deals with others, including colleagues and students. Responses to question three also related to the twin themes of management and leadership. Listening to others and being able to delegate were identified as important skills. Such abilities help create "*an environment for successful research, or teaching"* (Focus Group 5). However, a latent theme here is the connection, or disconnection, between being able to work quickly and being able to listen well for instance. These are diverse skills and not every academic will possess either of them, never mind both in tandem. Again, this speaks to the composite, multifaceted nature of academic success and the need for lifelong learning. Also, while this Action focuses on the four areas of teaching, learning, research and writing, these focus groups consistently emphasized the importance of management and leadership skills in relation to one's mid-to-late career. Leadership intersects all four areas, but successful leadership in each of these areas may be distinct to those areas. Furthermore, individuals are often elevated to leadership roles in academia not on the basis of their leadership skills but, more often than not, on the quality and quantity of their research. Ineffective leadership leads to toxic work environments which affect all stakeholders, including students. The demands that leadership places on academics frequently crosses over into their personal lives: "*I don't know if it's possible to really manage that, to really manage all the emotional load you have with your colleagues and in your private life. You do what you can*" (Focus Group 2). The need for institutional support in this area, according to these focus groups, appears vital.

The challenges of dealing with unexpected amounts of administration work and career advancement into the executive branch of institutions presented challenges for candidates whose expertise lay elsewhere. Managing others in one's later career was reported as being emotionally challenging and an area where leadership training and other institutional support is required. A participant from group two reported on the diverse challenges faced as one's career advanced:

> *And the second phase was when I became a Professor and when, in France*
> *when you become a Professor, it's like, you know, all the admin tasks are just*
> *drowning you. And so, I was in charge, I have been in charge of many things,*
> *I've created, eh, the Language Resource Centre at my university, I've created,*
> *umm, Masters programmes, I created a project with 16 people, I'm in charge*
> *of my research lab with 40 people, and what I've found most, what I find most*
> *difficult is to find time for research, and I try to stay at home at least one day*

a week, to be isolated, not answering my email, not answering my phone, nothing. And, ehh, what I also find very challenging is the emotional, eh, load of having to manage so many people who have problems, or who ask you for your help for their research or career or whatever, or a short-term contract that will end next month, "I need money to get another contract", and it's difficult to tell people I'm not sure I can hire you again next month … you know … I think you all know about that. And this, I think it is very, it's very difficult, and another thing I do to manage that is every summer I take at least two weeks' holiday without any telephone, without any email. I spend two weeks in the countryside with cows and whatever.

The need for better institutional supports for mid-to-late career academics, especially in the areas of leadership, management and administration, was a latent concern across four of the six focus groups. Again this may be a feature or challenge associated with academic freedom. Having academics manage departments and research units is necessary for them to maintain control of the direction that these organisations will take across the four areas. Institutional support would need to recognize the need for academic leaders to maintain their autonomy while granting them support and training in areas where they have not received formal instruction such as administration and leadership.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Themes, Categories and Related Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
The Academic Personality	The Composite Nature of Academic Success Personal Traits Openness and Creativity Neuroticism Extraversion and Agreeableness: Institutional and Social Factors	Interest/enjoyment/proficiency Perseverance Openness Creativity Luck/Background Collaboration/Networking Resilience Enjoyment/Curiosity Optimism Mobility Knowledge creation and communication Freedom Lacking confidence at the beginning, Stresses Personal Challenges Coping with negative feedback Feeling lonely

Values and Purposes	Integrity Openness to the other Fairness Equality/Social Justice Lifelong Learning Student Centred Academic Honesty Sharing Helping Colleagues and ECIs Collaboration	Openness/Exploration Openness to the other Respectful of Others Dissemination/Sharing Knowledge Transfer Lifelong Learning Collaboration Integrity Student Centred Supporting Colleagues Honesty Equality Fairness Freedom Luck (The Problem of) Composite Factors (In relation to Institution)
Processes, Knowledge and Skills	Lifelong Learning Time Management Leadership	Writing Collaboration Lack of Institutional Supports Knowledge Creation and Communication Freedom

		Luck Personality Finding Work Negotiating the University System Lack of Recognition for New Fields Knowledge Transfer Managing Others Time Management Administration Work Teaching Composite Nature of Academic Success Funding Promotion Training Personal Issues – Work/Life Balance Internal Communication Better Institutional Structure Network Publish Set Goals Persistence

Appendix 2: Peer Review Document

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM)

Action number: CA15221

STSM title: Thematic analysis of focus group data in order to understand and map excellence in teaching, learning, research and writing at higher education.

STSM start and end date: 11/02/19 – 25/02/19

Grantee name: Dr. Alan Carmody, Maynooth University, Ireland

Host colleague: Dr. Michelle Attard-Tonna, University of Malta

Report on peer review of work in progress

A work-in-progress version of the thematic analysis was sent to Dr Attard-Tonna by Dr Carmody, during his STSM, on the 24th February. Both colleagues met on 26th of February to discuss the document where Dr Attard-Tonna provided a valuable peer review of the work.

Dr Attard-Tonna stated that she found the report insightful, faithful to the data and reported that it fulfilled the criteria of a latent thematic analysis. Dr Attard Tonna only made minor suggestions regarding the format of the report. She asked that the excerpts from the transcripts be put in italics and that the report should also indicate the name/number of the focus group that the excerpt was taken from and that the date of the focus group also be included in the initial citation. Dr Attard Tonna also suggested that the report include a table of the themes, categories and codes as part of the appendices.

Dr Carmody noted his gratitude to Dr Attard-Tonna for her comprehensive review of the work, her support throughout the course of the STSM and more generally her hosting of his visit to the University of Malta. The report has been redrafted according to Dr Attard-Tonna's suggestions and will be provided to her as it appears here.

March 2019.

Bibliography

Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.