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Influence of Senior Academic Staff Members' Expertise on Learners' Career Progression. A focus on Higher Education in Kenya

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Abstract

A full academic career encompasses both successes and failures. The purpose of this study was to delve into academic successes and failures, going beyond the conventional focus on objective measures, such as performance, rankings, and funding. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve senior academics from seven universities, we explored personal definitions of success and failure and lessons learned from these experiences. Key findings reveal shifts in senior academics' perceptions of success and failure over time, providing a window into what matters to academics throughout their careers. Drawing on concepts from research on 'regret' and 'polarities', the study identifies 'core realms of success and failure. The researcher also proposes a reconceptualization of success and failure that goes beyond positioning these as binary opposites and presents a more integrated, nuanced, and holistic view of what it means to lead a 'good academic life'. The study provides pragmatic reflective prompts for institutions to consider as they reimagine policies and practices to better support this vision.

Keywords: *Senior Academic Staff Expertise, Learners' Career Progression, Higher Education in Kenya*

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1. Introduction

This study emphasizes the importance of valuing senior academics' wisdom, highlighting their successes and failures. By doing this, the study aims to give due recognition to two overlooked aspects in academia: the perspectives of senior academics and the insights gained from failure. When approached constructively, failure drives progress and fosters improvement (e.g., Clark &Thompson, 2013; Jungic et al., 2020). A purposeful approach to understanding failure can enhance our understanding of success (Bergqvist, Bjarnegård, & Zetterberg, 2013).

The study focuses on individuals at the epicenter of disembodied metrics in academia and attempts to capture more of the fullness of humans. The 'global ranking game' (Kauppi, 2018) provides the backdrop for examining senior academics' perspectives on success and failure. In this context, the notion of 'excellence' in higher education is narrowly and quantitatively defined and exemplified by systems such as the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom (Erickson, Hanna, & Walker, 2021) and the Performance-Based Research Fund in New Zealand (TEC, 2017). The

researcher seeks to uncover the complexities of academic experiences by exploring the co-existence of successes and failures within individuals. Inspired by Sutherland's (2018) call for a more 'holistic' approach to academic development, the researcher aims to gather insights from senior academics, presenting a nuanced and intricate picture of their career journeys.

Senior academics contribute wisdom, leadership, mentorship, and institutional knowledge (Baldwin & Zeig, 2013; Bland & Bergquist, 1997; Cruz & Herzog, 2018; Gardner & Blackstone, 2017; Rice & Finkelstein, 1993). Research on senior academics is limited, however (Cruz Herzog, 2018; Gardner & Blackstone, 2017; Rice & Finkelstein, 1993), and a consistent definition of the term 'senior' academic is lacking (e.g., Cruz and Herzog 2018; Rice & Finkelstein, 1993), and a consistent definition of the term 'senior' academic is lacking (e.g. Cruz & Herzog 2018; Rice & Finkelstein, 1993). Nevertheless, Rice & Finkelstein (1993, p.9) propose a definition of 'senior faculty' as academics who have achieved seniority within their institution. Typically, they are older, experienced, and hold higher academic ranks (Rice & Finkelstein, 1993, p.9). These senior academics have advanced careers and significant academic experience (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021).

Defining the notions of 'success' and 'failure' is crucial. In career research, success has been defined through objective and subjective constructs (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom 2005, 183), with these constructs guiding studies in academia (e.g., Sutherland 2017). Conversely, despite the inevitability and pervasiveness of failure in academic settings (Jungic et al., 2020, p.32), scholarly examination of failure remains scarce (Davies, Disney, & Harrowell, 2021). The paucity of research is further exacerbated by the diverse range of definitions and interpretations of failure (Jungic et al., 2020). Consequently, a practical approach to comprehending failure in academia is to juxtapose it against objective and subjective notions of 'success'.

Within the literature on success in academia, the objective construct positions success as research productivity, salary advancement, promotion rates, and positional roles/status. These measurable outputs are considered performative indicators of success (Archer, 2008; Sutherland, 2017). Accordingly, objective failure indicators encompass unachieved promotions (Clark & Thompson, 2013) and shortcomings in research productivity (Wisker, 2016). The latter may include ideas not disseminated due to unsubmitted proposals or publications, methodological failures (e.g. Clare 2019), non-replicable intervention studies, manuscript rejections, and unsuccessful grant applications (Holdsworth, 2020). There is limited empirical research exploring these issues from the perspectives of senior academics. Research on the processes associated with promotion to the rank of professor sheds light on the recognition of research productivity and teaching in different national contexts (Parker, 2008; Subbaye, 2017). Gardner and Blackstone's work (2017) explore faculty 'agency' regarding reapplying for promotion to professor after failure or discouragement. They found that power and status differentials contribute to women's withdrawal of promotion applications. Further work to understand the factors influencing academics' decisions to pursue promotion is essential.

The subjective construct of academic success encompasses career satisfaction, including job– life satisfaction, teaching performance, student impact, and contribution to society (Sutherland, 2017). It also considers aspects such as professional and personal balance and relational considerations, including (Stupnisky, Weaver-Hightower, & Kartoshkina, 2015) and mentorship of other

researchers (Dever, Dalton, & Tayton, 2006). Sutherland (2017, 757) notes that while subjective notions of success are flexible, they often conflict with objective expectations.

We can examine teaching failures by applying a 'subjective' lens to the sparse literature on failure. While formal discussions of teaching failures are 'conspicuously absent' (Clare, 2019, p. 3), a notable study explores the perspectives and experiences of ten award-winning teachers (Jungic et al., 2020), and even shortcomings in curriculum (re)design. Subjective failures might include 'ordinary failures' (Anderson, 2020), such as when our interest in a research area diminishes over time (Anderson, 2020) and ideas are no longer pursued (Sjøvoll, Grothen, & Frers, 2020).

Further research is needed to explore failure and success in academia. This study aims to investigate the rarely studied perspectives of senior academics on success and failure. By embracing success and failure, we seek to promote a more balanced scholarly identity and contribute to the limited attention given to normalizing academic failure (Carter, Sturm, & Manalo, 2021).

2. Methodology

This exploratory study investigates how senior academics perceive academic successes and failures and what they have learned from them. This learning captures shifts in perceptions and definitions of success and failure over time as well as lessons gleaned from their experiences. The study explores academic success and failure from the same participants' perspectives, an approach that appears novel. The main research questions of this qualitative exploratory case study were:

(1) What do success and failure mean to senior academics?

(2) How have senior academics' perceptions of success and failure shifted over time?

Participants, Recruitment, and Data Collection

A convenience sampling approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) included study participants from various universities and disciplines to analyze perceptions of success and failure that might be common rather than tied to specific individuals or contexts. After receiving approval from our institutional Research and Innovations Office/Committee, the researcher conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews. Non-Kenyan participants were interviewed either at their respective higher-education institutions or while traveling to Kenya. Most of the participants were recommended to the researcher by colleagues as they were senior academics and willing to participate in the study. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form before the interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews, lasting 25–90 minutes, began with questions about success before transitioning to discussions on failure.

To avoid biases, the researcher practiced reflexivity and self-awareness (Darwin Holmes, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2023), ensuring that the researcher's beliefs did not influence data. The researcher respected professional boundaries, treated participants fairly, and employed rigorous data collection and analysis techniques. Remaining open-minded, he valued the diverse perspectives and experiences of senior academics, including their successes and failures. Recognizing the impact of social context on personal experience (Gardner and Blackstone 2017, referring to Henslin 2012), he was attentive to how participants' dispositions toward the topic could be influenced.

Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on new or early-career academics, this research intentionally captures the viewpoints of senior academics. This enabled us to explore how shifts in perspectives on success and failure evolve over a long career (averaging 25 years), offering valuable insights beyond the vulnerable and stressful early stages of academia. The study focuses on late-career professors of the highest academic ranking who have demonstrated expertise and leadership and held senior administrative positions such as Dean, Deputy Dean, and Vice-Rector of Research. The twelve participants in the study represent seven universities: University of Nairobi (2 males [M], one female [F]), Kenyatta University (1M, 1F), Moi University (1M, 1F), Egerton University (2F), Maseno University (1M), JKUAT (1M) and Kisii University (1M).

Data analysis techniques

Data analysis followed a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to capture the rich perspectives and experiences of senior academics. The researcher began by cleaning/preparing the raw data files, addressing transcription errors and inconsistencies. Independently, he immersed himself in the data, thoroughly reading and reviewing the transcripts line by line. Using Microsoft Word, he manually applied open coding to the interview data, identifying general themes and upper-level categories aligned with the aims of the study: exploring the meanings of success and failure for academics and understanding shifts in perceptions over time. He identified specific sub-categories within these categories, considering the participants' words at both the surface (semantic) and inferred (latent) levels. To ensure consistency, he observed and resolved any areas of disagreement. Quotations were selected as key examples in each category.

3. Findings

The study first explores how senior academics define academic success and failure and then examines the shifts in their perceptions over time through lessons learned.

What do success and failure mean to senior academics?

When asked, 'What does success in an academic context mean to you?', participants identified success across five broad categories: promotions, the success of students, recognition, job satisfaction, and doing one's best.

The predominant view of success focuses on promotion, both academic and positional. Academic promotions involve advancing to higher ranks, such as associate professor or professor, whereas positional promotions refer to assuming leadership positions, such as dean, head of department, or committee member. Participants view academic promotion as the ultimate success: 'My big … successes in academia would be things like getting promoted to 'professor'. Participants commonly expressed that setting goals and attaining promotion to higher levels signified success. Some participants considered meeting institutional targets for key performance indicators and subsequent promotion as successful. One participant reiterated that 'in the sciences, it is all measured quantitatively, the number of publications, how much grant money you bring in, the H-index … eventually … you end up being a professor'. Participants also considered positional promotions as indicators of success. One participant, for example, highlighted that he 'jumped … going from associate professor to professor, then dean, member of the council'. Another participant added that 'getting the dean's thingy was intrinsically motivating.

The second category of academic success is students' success, such as their graduation and progress as independent researchers. Successful academics demonstrate an appreciation for and connection with their students, considering students' successes as their own. For example, one participant noted, 'I am 63 … you know a 20-year-old would not give me the time of day in any other normal walk of life, but here you know they pot along to my office, drag me for coffee … I see those as successes' (P6). P7 added that in her role, she meets students who had significant difficulties and whom she had helped: 'seeing them cross the stage [graduating] … was just fantastic because some of their stories … are quite dire'.

The third success category is recognition, including international, national, and institutional acclaim. Participants emphasized the importance of peer recognition achieved through publications in highly ranked journals, securing competitive research grants and fellowships, and receiving invitations as keynote speakers and reviewers for prestigious journals. Participants commented that publications and grants allowed them to contribute to the field and society. P2 recalled fondly that one of his memorable success stories was publishing his first paper: 'The first paper is probably the best one'. 'I want to have some kind of significance for my community … to develop our country and culture', P4 remarked. P5 considered securing research grants as a form of peer recognition: 'I am quite passionate about research so … what defines success in an academic career, I would say to get one of the top research projects. P7 revealed that to win a national teaching award and obtain 'that level of recognition for my teaching was probably one of the highlights of my career'. Additionally, international fellowships were highly esteemed. P6 seemed to consider international fellowship a success while also asserting that recognition at the national level is essential: 'I am a Fellow of the Royal Society of … but not a Fellow of the Royal Society of [home country]'.

Two additional categories identified in the data are job satisfaction and doing a good job. Most participants emphasized their passion for their work. Job satisfaction stemmed from facilitating others' learning and success, enhancing the learning environment, exerting influence within the department, and ensuring smooth departmental operations. As an academic developer, P7, noted that 'when you see academics improving course design and using innovative approaches … they keep us going … they sustain us. Participants indicated that doing a good job applies across a range of contexts: I mean, it's across the board doing the best you can and things going well from getting papers published, department running smoothly, students graduating, yeah, so that's probably always been my motivation' (P2). In a culture where teachers are highly regarded, P10 remembers students kissing his hands as a sign of appreciation, reflecting his success as a teacher.

Failure is predominantly perceived as failure to secure academic promotions. One senior academic was dismayed, mainly because 'I wasn't even allowed to apply …. I found that a terrible judgment of me, and so I was bitter and grumpy' (P6). P1's dean thought she was ready, and she applied for a promotion, only to be rejected. P2 identified a similar failure – his application for academic promotion was unsuccessful. Annoyingly for him, less-qualified colleagues were promoted. Failure in the realms of teaching and supervision was identified when students did not learn as expected (P10) or when PhD students did not obtain good results (P4): 'if you don't teach well … I feel that I'm not successful (P10). P2 considered it a failure if her doctoral students did not perform well.

A third category of failure was a lack of recognition, encompassing instances of paper and funding application rejections, and failure to attain prestigious positions. Participants also provided examples, such as a lack of trust when individuals refused to be interviewed for their research study. P5 shared instances of unsuccessful papers and grants, while P7 mentioned not receiving a national teaching award as an example of failure.

How have senior academics' perceptions of success and failure shifted over time?

The study explores participants' changing perspectives of success and failure over time. It highlights these shifts and lessons learned in italics. The study first discusses the evolving perceptions of success and then examines the shifts in perceptions of failure.

Shifts over time in senior academics' perceptions of success

Some participants commented that they have come to understand over time what is required in the role of an academic:

I was naïve when I stepped into academia … I don't think I really knew what the job involved in being honest

> … I took on too much service, so I didn't really know what I was doing but as time wore on, it was a job that I really realized I enjoyed. I've always enjoyed teaching. In fact, I initially thought that was what academia was all about, and that was a mistake. It took me a long time to learn that. (P6)

P5 noted that one needs to participate in administrative tasks to achieve success: I did not know the ins and outs of academia, so I found out that there are a lot of administrative tasks involved that you need to do, and if you want to be successful, you must participate in this.

One participant stated that earlier in his career, he thought it was easier to be successful and now views success as ephemeral:

> I thought it was much easier to be successful than it is, and my feeling now as well is that it's … unstable. I'm really at the peak of my career, I would say, with this grant I got. I don't know if I will ever get another one. Probably not. So, this is not a definite situation; it can change at any point. … [Y]ou can be here today and then in three years' time; you can have no projects. Probably, they will make you do a lot of teaching that you won't want to do, and no students, no publications, no grants, no conferences, and I have seen this happening with people who are quite close to me. (P5)

Participants commented on 'everyday' and more 'idealistic' successes. P7 remarked on a shift in perception from big 'S' Success in her early career to success now involving small 's', or everyday successes:

> I don't think I've really thought about it. I suspect … that when I started out, it probably would've been all about promotions, you know, those big S things, but over the years, it's more about the small 's' everyday sort of successes or more common successes.

P4 commented that he is 'more idealistic now … looking at the real contributions and implications of the research and the community building aspects instead'.

Participants discussed shifts in how one views relationships with others. P7 noted that her perspective of success has shifted to seeing others succeed in research, especially postgraduate students whose journeys had been challenging. Another participant emphatically noted having learned and advised that 'It is people who are most important – learning to be nice, interact well and connect with everyone, including colleagues, people from human resources, administrators, students, and the people in the coffee shop' (P6). Participants reported that they have learned to be humble due to success and are now willing to assist others (P1). P2 clearly stated that he now advises junior colleagues due to his successes.

Participants learned that academic success involves moving away from the pervasive 'publish or perish' perspective, and instead involves building meaningful relationships and appreciating small, daily achievements. Participants also cautioned that in some cases, success meant an increased workload, including more projects, more PhD students, and more teaching (P5). Participants reinforced that [s]uccess can be very subjective. What is success to you personally cannot be the success of somebody else' (P3). Success should always be kept in perspective (P6). Success is about perseverance, resilience, and not taking things personally (P7).

Shifts over time in senior academics' perceptions of failure

Senior academics commented on changes in perspective over time regarding failure in general and, in some cases, their own failures. Participants stated that they had become less emotionally tied up. P7, who was not initially successful with her teaching award application, commented:

> At the time, I was very emotionally tied up, whereas now I can be much more objective … thinking back to that portfolio submitted and I wouldn't even like to look at it now, and thinking … 'thank God' … That wasn't really me, my voice in that portfolio, so in a way, it was a blessing in disguise.

P7 added, 'earlier in my career, I would take those rejections quite hard … but now I just, I expect it'. P5 noted that, after many failures, it is easier to move on: they are actually not that big a deal anymore. Even sometimes I will not be so happy for a couple of days but … I am soon over them. Conversely, P2 considered failure as mellowing and accepting the 'swings and roundabouts' over time and described failure as experiencing 'temporary setbacks.

Participants also reported recognizing opportunities that arose from a perceived failure. P5, who was unsuccessful in a job application, recalled that the failure provided a more significant opportunity elsewhere:

> "Many years ago, so I just finished my PhD, and then I had a place for … doing my post-doc already … I applied for a permanent position in another university … and I didn't get it. At the time, that seemed to me like the biggest failure ever … in hindsight, it was actually a good thing that I didn't get it because probably I would still be an associate professor there working under someone who was very well established, and I probably would not have the freedom to develop my own research group in the way that I did, and I would never have got this grant that I have now. But at the time, it seemed like a really bad thing".

In terms of promotions, P2, who is in a leadership position, mentioned that his advice to colleagues applying for promotion is to be realistic in that the application may not be successful:

> "I try to get honest assessments of how I think people will go if they're applying for promotion … I don't think you're guaranteed. I think there's a good chance you might miss out on it. But be prepared, and if you do get knocked back, it shouldn't come as a surprise, and two, it will bruise you for a while. But you know … I do try and be honest about where I think people sit in my assessment of promotion, so that's probably the main lesson I use, but so we'll try and help people here as best I can from that experience".

P4 added, 'Let it go, not bother too much, try to learn from it, try to see it from [the evaluator's] perspective, think rationally about it, think about the long-term consequences. P7, who was initially unsuccessful at achieving a national teaching award but subsequently was successful, commented on recognizing the excellence of others:

> "I had just a greater recognition that actually there are terrific teachers all around the country, any of whom … could get this award. So, to even get through … to be nominated, I should've just taken heart from that and thought … it isn't really important to get this national award".

Participants also highlighted that not learning from failure is a failure. P7 and P8 indicated that failures are common in pursuing recognition or promotion; one should not give up. P7 reiterated that 'part of academia is missing out on getting things and learning from that process … I think if I gave up, maybe I would think of that as failure'. P1 also realized that she had to be careful and self-evaluate before applying for promotions:

> "I faced my failure. That helped because when I went for my professorship, I was open. Again, I realized, ok it's 50/ 50, if I don't get it. I've learned to be careful and … that actually, only you can evaluate yourself".

P5 commented, with the rejection of proposals and the papers, you learn how to make them better and to minimize your chances of getting them rejected next time'.

Perspective and persistence were recognized as essential for interpreting and learning from failure. P2 adopted the perspective of an optimistic pessimist: 'Things will turn out … You know, often things will go wrong. But … if you assume things … keep looking for what could go wrong the most, then generally we're pleasantly surprised when things work out well'. P4 added, 'You have to try; try to create a culture of curiosity, try to encourage ourselves to be curious about real problems, try to find out how evaluators think, so that it helps us with the next project." P6 added, 'Not everything works out for you and sometimes … you just need to get perspective.'

Another lesson that participants highlighted was the notion of normalizing failure: [P]apers getting published, not getting published … it's just normal, and if you can't take criticism and critique and knock back … it really isn't for you. You're going to constantly get critiqued and knocked back and … most grant applications fail, and those papers take more than one submission … every bit of work you do will be critiqued. Just get used to it or go and do something else. (P2)

P5 admitted that she had to learn to normalize failure. P12 added, 'I think really the most important lesson is that I've been learning from these failures that they are normal, and if it's possible to get over them so … I just put them away'. P7 spoke about resilience as essential to normalizing failure: not giving up, trying again, believing in oneself, and the importance of mentoring in such situations. P2 stated, 'Looking at setbacks, parents had [e.g., surviving a war, migrating, personal

difficulties] … [W]here do you get the resilience from? A lot of its parents, you know. If they handled it, you could handle it as well'.

4. Discussion

The study's exploration of senior academics' perspectives on success and failure prompted the researcher to reconsider the traditional 'objective' and 'subjective' constructs. While the researcher initially relates his findings to the existing literature, he then expands our exploration by introducing the notion of 'core realms' of success and failure. This broader perspective allows him to characterize what it means to lead a 'good academic life'. Additionally, he proposes moving beyond a binary view of success and exploring the potential benefits of a more nuanced, holistic approach.

Perspectives on a 'good academic life.'

Senior academics' perspectives in this study align with existing conceptualizations of success and failure. While the constructs of 'objective' and 'subjective' (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005) have been predominantly applied to success, the study found that both success and failure were indeed explained along these constructs. Objectively, participants emphasized 'measurable' and performative' (Archer, 2008; Sutherland, 2017) aspects of academic life, such as promotions and recognition (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). Subjectively, they discussed teaching and supervision experiences, including both successful and challenging outcomes.

We noticed similarities among the first three categories of success and failure: promotions, teaching and supervision/success of students, and recognition. However, the subjective categories of 'job satisfaction' and 'doing one's best' were unique to success. We speculate why senior academics might not have mentioned job satisfaction and not doing their best in relation to failure. Could academics who experienced job dissatisfaction have left academia before reaching senior positions? Additionally, job dissatisfaction and not doing one's best might touch upon existential questions of meaning and purpose (e.g. Esfahani Smith 2017), making them sensitive or emotionally challenging to acknowledge or discuss. These findings have implications for future research, particularly in relation to the concept of 'faculty vitality', 'the synergy between high levels of satisfaction, productivity, and engagement that enables faculty members to maximize their professional success and achieve goals in concert with institutional goals' (Palmer et al., 2013, p.91). Notably, studies on the vitality of senior academics highlight their focus on commitments where they can have 'the biggest impact' or make 'the biggest difference' (Cruz & Herzog 2018, p.29), including research projects and work with students.

Participants' changing perspectives on success and failure revealed essential insights. They better understood the academic role and the transient, ephemeral nature of success. Within an expanded landscape of success, participants appeared able to embrace more expansive perspectives on failure, which involved normalizing failure, becoming (more) realistic, letting go, and being less emotional. They also discussed how their perceptions of colleagues evolved, from valuing relationships and supporting others' success to recognizing their peers' inherent excellence.

Current literature focuses on 'objective' and 'subjective' constructions, but the study's data prompts us to seek a more nuanced understanding of success and failure. The researcher draws inspiration from Pink's (2022) studies on regret in which thousands of participants' regrets are

categorized into four 'core' realms and consider how the notion of core realms might be applied to understand/categorize senior academics' perceptions of success and failures from this study, Core realms of success and failure in academia might be viewed as validation (e.g. promotions, grants, positions), altruism (supporting others' growth), meaning and purpose (contributing, working with purpose), learning (drawing lessons from and persevering through failures), relationships (valuing others), and doing one's best. These realms provide insights into the nuanced nature of academic success and failure.

Moving away from a view of success and failure as 'opposites': integrating perspectives.

It is crucial that we promote healthier discourse on failure within academic settings to normalize these experiences. Rather than focusing solely on 'redemptive' narratives of failure (Clare, 2019, p. 3; Horton, 2020, p. 3) that emphasize 'triumph over adversity' (Horton, 2020, p. 1), it is crucial to encourage a broader understanding of failure. Horton (2020, 5) asks how we might 'allow more complex, ambivalent, challenging, modest ways of thinking about failure in the academy'. However, it is essential to recognize that sharing accounts of failure stories can be 'alienating' and reinforce narratives of 'resilience' (Clare, 2019, p.3) while exposing systemic inequities (Clare, 2019; Horton, 2020; Jungic et al., 2020). Clare (2019) illustrates this by recounting the emotional impact on an academically precarious individual upon hearing about a more stable colleague's third unsuccessful grant application. For precarious academics who often have a high teaching commitment, finding time to write even a single grant application, let alone three, seems unfeasible. This lack of time even to experience failure can be distressing. As Clare (2019) states, 'If failure becomes synonymous with resilience, then nothing changes, and intersectional structures that privilege certain groups remain … [W]hen it feels like you are failing even to be a failure, the (emotional) consequences are devastating' (Clare, 2019, p.4). Therefore, we advocate for a more 'expansive', 'integrative', and 'sustainable' (Emerson & Lewis, 2019) perspective on what it means to live a 'good' academic life.

As leaders in examining success and failure within the same individual, we adopt a framework that integrates common conceptions of 'success' and 'failure' into a more holistic approach. This perspective draws upon the concept of 'polarities' from the literature on adult development (Emerson & Lewis, 2019; Johnson, 1996; Sharma & Cook-Greuter, n.d.). The term 'polarities' refers to opposing states. Emerson & Lewis (2019, p.8) define polarity as 'a situation in which two interdependent and seemingly contradictory states must be maintained for success over time'. Drawing on the work of Johnson (1996), Sharma and Cook-Greuter (n.d.) add that these poles are needed 'over time for a sustainable self and system' (8, emphasis added). Examples of polarities include light/dark, centralization/decentralization, competition/collaboration, and work/rest (Emerson & Lewis, 2019). With polarities, a privileged or preferred pole often emerges, influenced by personality, cultural context, and geography (Sharma & Cook-Greuter n.d.). Notably, individuals tend to value and align their identities with one pole, leading to a fear of losing that pole, while rejecting its opposite (Sharma & Cook-Greuter, n.d., p. 11).

Success and failure in academia (and perhaps in most domains) are often positioned as opposites, with success being the privileged pole due to the prevailing promotion and reward structures. Presumably, the stronger our attachment to success, the more we fear its loss and reject failure. However, both poles have their 'benefits' and 'overuses' (Emerson & Lewis, 2019, p.29). The

tendency is to focus solely on the benefits of success while disregarding its overuses, such as stifling risk and innovation, breeding a culture of shame when things do not go as planned, or fostering unhealthy competition among colleagues. Failure may have 'benefits', serving as a powerful 'catalyst for learning' (Carter, Sturm, & Manalo, 2021, p.191). By shifting our perspectives away from a dichotomous view of success and failure, we can appreciate the benefits of failure, such as the lessons it teaches, the insights it offers into unproductive paths that guide us toward productive ones, and the revelations of our core values. This shift is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of success and failure (Clark & Thompson, 2013). To effectively manage the polarity between success and failure and their integration, Palmer and Emerson (2022) highlight the importance of defining a 'greater purpose statement' that fosters a shared vision of how individuals and institutions conceptualize academic careers. We advocate for a more expansive and productive way forward that acknowledges and embraces both success and failure, providing opportunities to learn from both experiences.

Emerson and Lewis (2019), based on the work of Rohr) Describe the 'Third Way', which represents a unique integration and transformation of two poles, here, the success and failure poles. P9's observation that 'success and failure are not opposites' may allude to this concept. Several participants illustrated the intertwined and interdependent nature of success and failure in their academic trajectories. Insights gained from experiences labeled as failures were instrumental in shaping future success. For instance, P7 realized a failed teaching application occurred because she had not followed her authentic 'inner voice'. However, a later successful application written in her voice became a 'highlight' of her career.

Considering success and failure together is crucial to promoting a more comprehensive understanding of academic life. Furthermore, like Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom (2005, 180), the researcher proposes exploring the interdependence between the 'objective' and 'subjective' constructs. However, language often fails to capture a qualitatively different perspective that integrates opposites (Emerson & Lewis, 2019). Finding words that capture this integrated approach goes beyond grammar. We are challenged to conceptualize a holistic notion of what it means to be a 'good academic' and to live a satisfying academic life. The values revealed in our earlier exploration of the core realms of success and failure may serve as the foundation for this reconceptualization.

5. Conclusion

To foster a reconceptualization of success and failure, engaging in a collective dialogue within our academic community is essential. Holdsworth (2020) emphasizes the importance of adopting a collectivist perspective that emphasizes 'solidarity'. This shift challenges the prevailing discourse that focuses on individual experiences, while disregarding the systemic structures that shape the contexts in which 'successes' and 'failures' are constructed and construed (Clare, 2019; Gill, 2009; Holdsworth, 2020). As a community, we must examine our institutional policies and practices and envision a more integrative, holistic, and humane approach to career development and reward.

6. Recommendations

The researcher recommends that further research be conducted by researchers in the future, which will focus on the creation of a transformative vision for our academic community, as well as discuss and get answers to the questions suggested below:

- What institutional practices and structures contribute to labelling work as either 'successes' or failures'?
- How does institutional language shape perceptions of 'success' and 'failure'? What alternative language reinforces this perception of our work?
- How do we overemphasize and overuse the concept of success within institutions? What are the intended outcomes of sharing success stories, and how effective are these stories at creating the desired impact?
- How are we documenting (institutional, departmental, individual) 'failures' as learning opportunities within institutions? Are we effectively using failures to learn and improve?

  How are lessons learned from past experiences integrated into future endeavors at institutional, departmental, and individual levels?
- What forums can be established to create safe spaces for sharing successes and failures? For example, could we incorporate discussion of success and failure as regular agenda items at departmental meetings or dedicate specific sessions to these topics at institutional teaching and learning conferences?
- How should promotion and award applications evolve? Should they go beyond highlighting grants received and awards earned to include failed grant applications and narratives of personal growth?
- How might mentoring programmes be designed to address both success and failure?
- Through our successes and failures, have we become more able to 'enact care, kindness, and generosity to others' (Pickerill 2020, as quoted in Davies, Disney, and Harrowell 2021, 4), which, we are reminded, 'should be an important part of being an academic' (Davies, Disney, and Harrowell 2021, p.4)?
- How might the 'core realms of validation, altruism, meaning and purpose, learning, relationships, and doing one's best be woven into institutional practices to enable more people to live a 'good academic life'?

The study provides empirical evidence highlighting academics' perspectives and emphasizing the importance of learning from successes and failures. This calls for a more expansive, nuanced, and holistic view of leading a satisfying academic career.

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