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Creating and sustaining positive psychological contracts to tackle work tensions: The case of academia in Vietnam

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Crafting psychological capital through generating positive psychological contract within career ecosystem as treatment to chronic occupational stressors

Summary: This empirical study seeks to explore alternative psychological contract creation of individual academics with other actors and different organisations in their career ecosystem to tackle work tensions, drawing on the theoretical framework developed from two theories, psychological contract and career ecosystem. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 41 academics in Vietnamese universities. This study offers a threefold contribution. First, it enhances the literature of psychological contract in exploring and explaining why employees still stay with the organisations in case of unfulfilled psychological contracts with their employers. Second, the utilisation of multi-theoretical framework, psychological contract, psychological capital and career ecosystem, deepens our understanding of how academics solve work tensions in the interactions with different actors and organisations in the extreme dynamic academic career. Third, the study highlights the role of a sustainable career ecosystem in transforming academics' occupational experiences and career tensions. (142 words)

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Introduction

Scholars have explored the careering practices of academics in 21st Century's academia with the adoption of managerialist ideologies embedded heavily on 'value adding and commercially oriented' (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008, p. 8, Kalfa et al. 2017). Specific practices prioritising maximum performance through optimising output and tying input to efficiency (Jones et al. 2020), and utilising managerial mechanisms such as audit, accountability and performativity (Davies and Thomas 2002, Knights and Clarke 2014). Many examples of academics' responses to managerialism by seeking "to escape into the system, displaying near psychopathic levels of careerism and over-identifying with journal rankings and grant income to a terrifying degree" have been reported around "Dark Academia", recently sketched by Fleming (2021, p. 144) which has received much attention of scholars in the field. Much about it is yet unknown how academics psychologically navigate employment tensions. More specifically, this current study focuses on how academics seek solutions for better careering experiences which utilises a multi-theory approach, drawing on the theoretical framework combined of three theories, psychological contract (PC) (Rousseau 1995, Rousseau et al. 2018), career ecosystem, and psychological capital (psycap), embedding on employment relationships between academics and other relevant career actors (Baruch 2015, Baruch and Rousseau 2019). This theoretical combination is the first to bring two long-developed theoretical frameworks (psychological contract and psychological capital) and one contemporary theory (career ecosystem) into one study to seek for a new measure to tackle academics' chronic career stressors which seem to have been reported but left uncured.

Since the introduction of the new academia in 1990s first in Anglo-Saxon and European countries (Deem 1998, 2001), the controversial topics around changes in academic identities and careering have attracted increasing attention of scholars in many contexts, both emerging and advanced academia. Managerialism has dramatically changed public sectors (Lane 1997), particularly higher education providers (Clarke and Knights 2015), with the predication of accountability, flexibility, quality and transparency (Lorenz 2012). With the existence of managerialism in academia, scholars have discussed about how universities as the traditional Ivory Towers have been blended in the corporate world and surrounded academics with corporate culture, values and goals (Dugas et al. 2020, Jones et al. 2020, 2021), which has embedded the changes in the relationships among academics, between academics and universities, academics and colleagues, academics and students, and academics and other stakeholders (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008, Kalfa et al. 2017). Competition is associated with measured environment explicitly including career progression and 'excellence' culture as well as ranking of research among universities and academics (Lynch 2015, Elangovan and Hoffman 2019), which pushes professional morality and collegiality under challenges (Fitzmaurice 2013, Kalfa et al. 2017), and academics become subjects of neoliberal higher education management and constant insecurity (Robinson et al. 2017, Knights and Clarke 2018).

Associating with such changes, numerous studies have recorded academics' experiences of the everyday professional practices. Such experiences are ranged from being bittersweet (Knights and Clarke 2014) to intense and dark with different spectrums of anger, shame, burn-out, and loss of self-confidence (Jaremka et al. 2020, Ratle et al. 2020), which takes place in both developed and developing economies (Ratle et al. 2020). Furthermore, seeking for explanations of academics' negative experiences within managerialist academia has attracted the attention of scholars in the field. Increasing research has looked at academics' tensions at work. A non-exhausted list includes: tensions between the commitment to teaching and research (Dugas et al. 2020); love of work and loathing of it (Alvesson and Spicer 2016); filling the aspirations

and finding meaning from their work (Knights and Clarke 2014); accomplishing the performance requirements set by management and fulfilling family responsibilities, equalling to being a successful academic and a good parent (Harris et al. 2019); staying or leaving the organisation or profession (Petersen 2011, Antoniadou and Quinlan 2021); the increasing demand for high quality research and lack of financial supports and low pay (Harris et al. 2019, Dugas et al. 2020).

In developing our theoretical framework, we firstly conceptualise the chronic career stressors of academics deriving from the unresolved breach of psychological contracts in employment relationships which happens as ‘one party in a relationship perceives another to have failed to fulfil promised obligation(s)’ (Robinson and Rousseau 1994, p. 247). Second, considering that academics work in a boundaryless career (Baruch and Hall 2004) with multiple relationships with different actors and organisations, we argue that there are multitude of expectations and obligations which might generate tensions and stressors (Alcover et al. 2017) as well as opportunities to boost career experiences within the career ecosystem. Finally, we follow the suggestion embedding within positive organisational psychology to discover positive psychological resource which can act as the protection of individuals from negative psychological consequences of long-term occupation stresses. From this multi-theory approach, we aim to answer the research question: **how does the creation of psychological contracts in the career ecosystem result in psychological capital to tackle academics’ chronic occupational stressors?**

From the understanding of how psychological contract creation (PCC) taking place in academics’ careering relationships, we aim to answer the research question: ***How does the creation of psychological contracts in the career ecosystem help tackle academics’ careering tensions?***

As far as we know, this study is the first to make the following contributions to the literature of both psychological contract and academic career ecosystem. First, the literature of psychological contract has widely focused on applying the understanding of PC in explaining the employee-employer relationships (Rousseau 1995), employees’ motivation at work (Rousseau 2001, Baruch and Rousseau 2019); predicting employees’ behaviours such quitting (Meyer and Allen 1997, Restubog et al. 2015). As argued by Rousseau et al. (2018) employees might stay with the organisation even in the case of no successful PC in the first place. However, there remained little experimental explanation for why employees still stay, which motivates us to contribute to the psychological contract literature. Second, through the theoretical framework, we aim to contribute to understanding the persistence of academics’ careering tensions causing occupational stressors, using examples of how academics solve tensions with different actors and gain better careering experiences. The contribution helps to clarify the meaning and impact of multiple identities and multiple relationships across actors in the labour market (Baruch and Rousseau 2019). Third, we highlight the role of a sustainable career ecosystem on transforming academics’ occupational experiences and resolving careering tensions.

Literature review

Inspired by the conceptual research of Baruch and Rousseau (2019) and the positive psychology (Luthans and Youssef-Morgan 2017), we answer the research question drawing on three theoretical frameworks of psychological contract, career ecosystem and psychological capital. The prevalence of psychological contract theory in careering and employment literature has gone beyond the employee-employer relationships and been utilised to explain the

complexity of individuals' employment in their resource-exchange relationships with colleagues, different organisations and institutions (Rousseau et al. 2018, Baruch and Rousseau 2019). The theory of career ecosystem deepens our understanding of the "social system of employment and career-related development and opportunity" that employees experience as they interact with other individuals, networks, firms, and social institutions (Baruch and Rousseau 2019, p. 92). Psychological capital rooted in positive psychology includes hope (positive motivation which helps preserve towards goals or when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed), self-efficacy (confidence to succeed at challenging tasks), resilience (ability of bouncing back and even beyond to achieve success, showing positive response to problems and adversity) and optimism (showing positive personal attribution about succeeding now and in the future) (Luthans and Youssef-Morgan 2017). The construct of psycap has been increasingly studied as the research subject within organisational psychology which seeks for personal resource to boost work performance, positive organisational behaviours, and to solve work stress burnout and negative emotions (Makhdoom et al. 2022). This list is not exhaustive.

In reviewing the adoption of psychological contract theory in career and employment literature, we firstly focus on understanding the core concepts of PC creation: expectations (expectancies) (beliefs about a future state of affairs), promises (commitment regarding some future course of action) and perceived employer obligations (the beliefs that the employer is expected to deliver a particular resource because it is the norm to do so or because the employer has promised to do so) (Rousseau et al. 2018, p. 1083). Secondly, we discuss the extent of PC breach and fulfilment (Lambert et al. 2003, Turnley et al. 2003, Castaing 2006, Sheehan et al. 2019), which helps develop the conceptualisation of academics' persistent occupational stressors.

As we approach the second theory in our theoretical framework, we firstly discuss the concept of career ecosystem (Baruch 2015, Baruch and Rousseau 2019, Bhaskar et al. 2022). Secondly, we proceed to review the characteristics of career ecosystem including the involvement of multiple entities – actors, interconnectedness, interactions and interdependencies (Donald et al. 2020). Utilising the career ecosystem framework is crucial not only to answer our research question, but also to explore different societal levels in academic career and consider it (academia) as an extreme dynamic system as academics can move across institutions, sectors and national borders (Baruch and Rousseau 2019).

The third component of this study's theoretical framework is psychological capital. The construct will be reviewed regarding hope, self-efficacy, resilience and optimism for further discussion of how these four psychological sources are obtained within academics' career ecosystem. Further, we discuss on the social mechanism of psycap (Bandura 1997, Luthans et al. 2013) to draw attention on the argument that a sustainable career ecosystem could become the important resource for academics to attain well-being and better career experiences.

Next, we discuss the issues exposed in academic profession through the lenses of the theoretical framework embedding on psychological contract, psycap and career ecosystem .

Academics' career success is crucially related to their connections with academic career ecosystem. Academic work is associated with the boundary-less nature (Baruch and Hall 2004) where the evaluation of their work is not fully embedded within the employing universities. Research quality is mostly peer-reviewed by experts in the field and teaching quality is evaluated by students. Very little in the professional processes of academics' activities are reviewed by their managers but the outcomes are heavily ranked based on rigid regulations (Baldry and Barnes 2012). The boundary-less nature of academic profession has potentially

contributed to prevailing networking among academics across institutions and consequently promoting professional satisfaction.

In addition, PC fulfilment and PCs have been reported to have impacts on employee engagement, job performance (Meyer et al. 2002, Turnley et al. 2003, Brunetto et al. 2012), recently extended to well-being and stress among employees (Duran et al. 2019) . However, the literature seems to have struggled to seek for evidence of individuals' ability and proactiveness to transform their negative occupation experiences into more positive and brighter ones which can potentially optimise their own capacity to proceed in the profession.

Methodology

Considering that our study aim is to capture the multitude of academics' career tensions and their reactions to such tensions in a complex career ecosystem, we adopt a qualitative method. Qualitative research allows us to elicit the interconnectedness, interactions and interdependencies between participants and other actors and institutions in the career ecosystem, which facilitates our interpretation of their career experiences (Bhaskar et al. 2022). Furthermore, this study, to our best knowledge, is the first empirical study developed on the theoretical frameworks of psychological contract and career ecosystem. An explorative approach is essential to reveal various unanswered questions about PC fulfilment and individuals' responses to PC fulfilment in a multi-agency context (Alcover et al. 2017). Moreover, the qualitative method allows this empirical study to examine the interconnected concepts within the three theories (psychological contract, psycap and career ecosystem) which were construed by the respondents (Low et al. 2016), which is used to develop our final conceptual framework.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 41 academics from 12 Vietnamese universities. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to over 2 hours. Interestingly, none of the participants had ever moved from one university to the other.

A thematic analysis is employed using a combination of inductive and literature-guided processes. The analysis is in the progress of theme refinement drawing on the conceptual interconnectedness between career ecosystem, psycap and psychological contract fulfilment. We anticipate developing a conceptual framework which can present how academics perceived PC fulfilment in the relationships with other actors (managers, colleagues, scholars) and different institutions (employing universities and other organisations) and how they made some PCs as more salient over others to break through pertinent career stressors resulted from unfulfillable PCs. Finally, the outcome of such PC fulfilment includes increased hope, self-efficacy, hope and resilience.

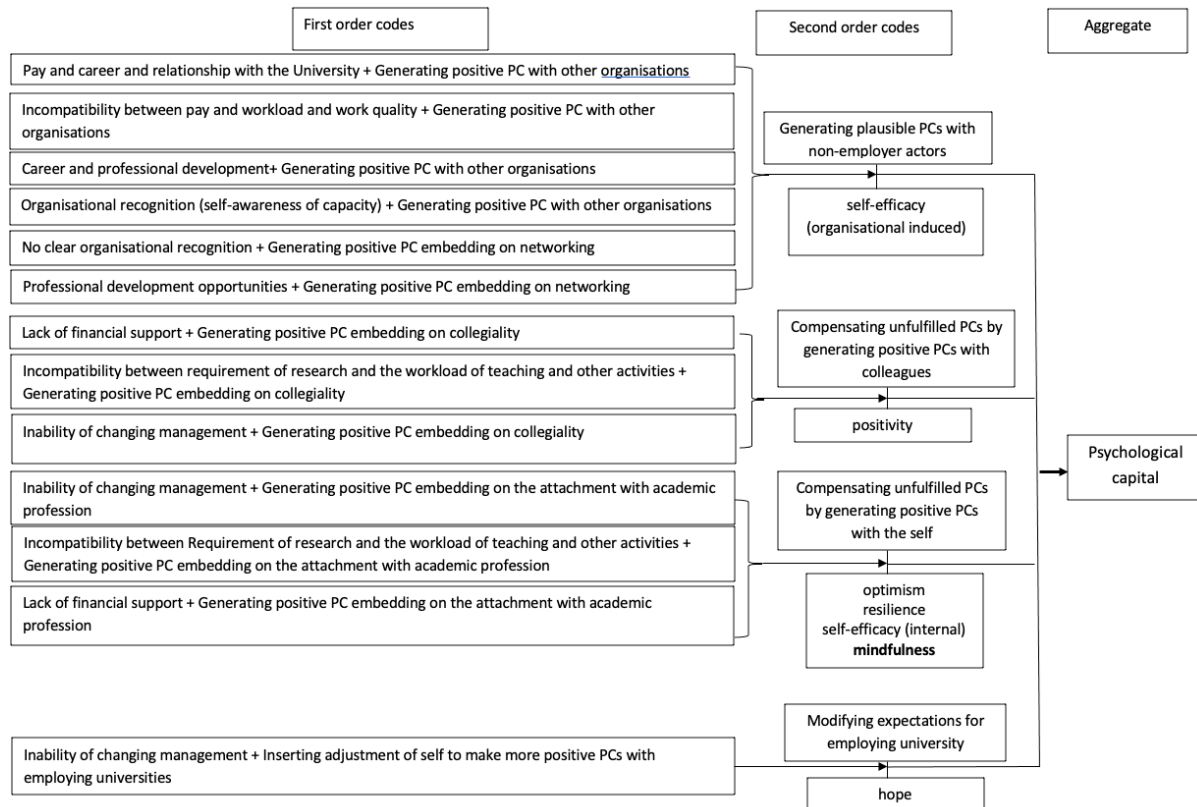
Results

At this stage, we have completed our data analysis (table 1) and developed the data structure (figure 1):

Table 1: Sample codes for first order coding

First order codes	Representative 1st order data
Pay and career and relationship with the University + Generating positive PC with other organisations	"I don't have enough time. My time is limited, I have something else to do outside of the university work. The university in fact does not have supports about staff's income for us to dedicate 100% to it. If I focused on teaching only, I won't have enough money to raise my children" (P36)
Incompatibility between pay and workload and work quality + Generating positive PC with other organisations	"Let me tell you this. University lecturer, if I only work for my university, I am reliant on them right? My salary is reliant on them. So if I want more money, I would need to teach more, I would need to be sweet with them. However, they would not let me do so, ok fine. I will go out there and work somewhere as well. Is it right? I have my own option, go out and work part time for another organisation. So I do extra out there and would not want to dedicate for the university" (P4)
Organisational recognition (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC with other organisations	<i>[To cope with the tensions of not having enough financial support from the university for research but still need to strive for organisational recognition of research quality]</i> "Actually, publication is a measurement of research, to check if the research is worthy or accepted. From my point of view, doing research with organisations is different. They pay me or not, which is the evidence. It is different from academia" (P38)
Career and professional development (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC with other organisations	<i>[For career development but not yet to decide to move]</i> "If there are no promises (for career development), I think I should not close my career within one single path. I can work for businesses or industries as they need someone like me. I can always contribute there and totally have a comfortable space and the treats I want" (P23)
No clear organisational recognition (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC embedding on networking	"I'm not sure if they have recognised or not, my relationships...I think they have seen my network, they could understand who I am, what my identity is. I think that's the reason why they actually have seen me differently from others those who doing research following a trend (just to fulfil requirements). This is what I am very proud" (P24) "Maybe I will identify myself to research community which I want to join, more than to my university. I think so" (P26)
Professional development opportunities + Generating positive PC embedding on networking	"I like that I can work on other projects, more about consultation because I like researching on different areas. When I do projects, I can see that. I can broaden, uhm work with many other people. I like working with different people, widen networks. I can work with lecturers in the university, I like it but it is not as good as working with external partners outside the university" (P6)
Lack of financial support + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality	"In fact, problems like low paid has happened to me every day for a long time. However, the working environment, colleagues, students and working norms, such things also happen every day, and I can only commit to it, for around a decade now, mainly because of the reason that I feel happy about them. If it was purely about money, I would have quit ages ago." (P12)
Inability of changing management + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality	"Actually, the relationships with colleagues have more effects on my commitment with the university than the management. In my opinion, regarding what I expect for, at the moment, is collegiality. If I stay with the university, it is because of the collegiality" (P35)
Incompatibility between requirement of research and the workload of teaching and other activities + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality	"In my department, there is a lot of work. When I took my education abroad, my colleagues had to cover my work. I think I should make it up for them...They expected me to support my colleagues' professional development. So whatever I have learned that I see beneficial for them, I would share it all to my colleagues" (P22)
Inability of changing management + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession	<i>[When asked about the possibility of changing the relationships with management, in addition to emphasising that it was impossible and frustrating]</i> "for now, I don't want to think about anything else, at the moment I just want to think about professional development for my own development, the development of my expertise" (P35)
Incompatibility between Requirement of research and the workload of teaching and other activities + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession	<i>[Financial support & unreasonable workload + Embedding on the attachment with academic profession]</i> "It is my pride, I can interact with many people, I can talk with my students. The feeling of standing in front of others and talk like that, it is happiness. Exactly, happiness. I feel happy, it (the profession) brings me a lot of motivation, encouragement in life and work" (P40)
Lack of financial support + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession	<i>[When asked about what would keep them with the Uni despite all the tensions (pay and time for research and teaching)]:</i> + "it is the values that I created from doing my work and the values I can offer to the society. I understand the nature of the profession, the relation between research and teaching. Hence why I find it more interesting" (P23) + "My opinion is that I consider it as leisure. It means if we try too hard, we become too tired and exhausted of it, we will not love it anymore. It is better if we take it easy" (P38)
Inability of changing management + Inserting adjustment of self to make more positive PCs with employing universities	<i>[When asked about the pressure on research outcomes]:</i> "Actually, the requirement of publication is the first in academic profession as everywhere around the world and Vietnam, people look at CVs, the first thing they will look for is how many publications, how they are. That's it" (P17) "It is like the story of a boat, we are in the boat, the boat sinks, we cannot just cry or blame on anything. We have to find the hole and solutions. Doing this will bring positive results. An organisation, they want the proactiveness from their staff, lecturers, especially organisations in the transitional time like in Vietnam" (P25)

Figure 1: Data structure



Initial discussion

In case of PC breach with employers, academics rely on career ecosystem to generate positive psychology in forms of psychological capital: hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism. The positive psychological resources help academics make sense of their self-meanings (being academics as to do teaching and research with different actors) and situational meanings (the policy and situations cannot be changed). This can potentially reduce risks of negative emotions. While the result of the current study supports arguments in previous studies that pscap could help buffer the effect of work demands on negative strain and assist academics to handle such demands more effectively (Lei et al. 2021), it offers a further suggestion that academics' perception of a sustainable career ecosystem could make a significant boost on such personal resource as pscap to overcome persistent occupational stressors. In other words, academics could potentially find their own treatment to hard-to-treat occupational stressors through exploring the potential embedding within their career ecosystem, especially in the case of boundaryless careers.

This current study also invites further conversation about the potential effects of one's career ecosystem on their pscap. As discussed above, generating positive PCs within career ecosystem helps promote pscap among academics to overcome persistent career tensions and stresses. However, what we have not investigated in this study is the possible consequences of generating such PCs with other actors who are not the employing university. This suggests that in particular occupations and/or situations if individuals cannot find resources for their pscap in employing organisations, they would craft PCs within career ecosystem but not with their employing organisations, which might result in organisational disengagement or disidentification. Such consequence could be minimised if there will be evidence from future studies to show that employing organisations offer supports to maintain sustainable career ecosystem for employees.

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First order codes	Representative 1 st order data
Pay and career and relationship with the University + Generating positive PC with other organisations	"I don't have enough time. My time is limited, I have something else to do outside of the university work. The university in fact does not have supports about staff's income for us to dedicate 100% to it. If I focused on teaching only, I won't have enough money to raise my children" (P36)
Incompatibility between pay and workload and work quality + Generating positive PC with other organisations	"Let me tell you this. University lecturer, if I only work for my university, I am reliant on them right? My salary is reliant on them. So if I want more money, I would need to teach more, I would need to be sweet with them. However, they would not let me do so, ok fine. I will go out there and work somewhere as well. Is it right? I have my own option, go out and work part time for another organisation. So I do extra out there and would not want to dedicate for the university" (P4)
Organisational recognition (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC with other organisations	<i>[To cope with the tensions of not having enough financial support from the university for research but still need to strive for organisational recognition of research quality]</i> "Actually, publication is a measurement of research, to check if the research is worthy or accepted. From my point of view, doing research with organisations is different. They pay me or not, which is the evidence. It is different from academia" (P38)
Career and professional development (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC with other organisations	<i>[For career development but not yet to decide to move]</i> "If there are no promises (for career development), I think I should not close my career within one single path. I can work for businesses or industries as they need someone like me. I can always contribute there and totally have a comfortable space and the treats I want" (P23)
No clear organisational recognition (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC embedding on networking	"I'm not sure if they have recognised or not, my relationships...I think they have seen my network, they could understand who I am, what my identity is. I think that's the reason why they actually have seen me differently from others those who doing research following a trend (just to fulfil requirements). This is what I am very proud" (P24) "Maybe I will identify myself to research community which I want to join, more than to my university. I think so" (P26)
Professional development opportunities + Generating positive PC embedding on networking	"I like that I can work on other projects, more about consultation because I like researching on different areas. When I do projects, I can see that. I can broaden, uhm work with many other people. I like working with different people, widen networks. I can work with lecturers in the university, I like it but it is not as good as working with external partners outside the university" (P6)

Lack of financial support + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality	“In fact, problems like low paid has happened to me every day for a long time. However, the working environment, colleagues, students and working norms, such things also happen every day, and I can only commit to it, for around a decade now, mainly because of the reason that I feel happy about them. If it was purely about money, I would have quit ages ago.” (P12)
Inability of changing management + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality	“Actually, the relationships with colleagues have more effects on my commitment with the university than the management. In my opinion, regarding what I expect for, at the moment, is collegiality. If I stay with the university, it is because of the collegiality” (P35)
Incompatibility between requirement of research and the workload of teaching and other activities + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality	“In my department, there is a lot of work. When I took my education abroad, my colleagues had to cover my work. I think I should make it up for them...They expected me to support my colleagues’ professional development. So whatever I have learned that I see beneficial for them, I would share it all to my colleagues” (P22)
Inability of changing management + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession	<i>[When asked about the possibility of changing the relationships with management, in addition to emphasising that it was impossible and frustrating]</i> “for now, I don’t want to think about anything else, at the moment I just want to think about professional development for my own development, the development of my expertise” (P35)
Incompatibility between Requirement of research and the workload of teaching and other activities + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession	<i>[Financial support & unreasonable workload + Embedding on the attachment with academic profession]</i> “It is my pride, I can interact with many people, I can talk with my students. The feeling of standing in front of others and talk like that, it is happiness. Exactly, happiness. I feel happy, it (the profession) brings me a lot of motivation, encouragement in life and work” (P40)
Lack of financial support + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession	<i>[When asked about what would keep them with the Uni despite all the tensions (pay and time for research and teaching)]:</i> + “it is the values that I created from doing my work and the values I can offer to the society. I understand the nature of the profession, the relation between research and teaching. Hence why I find it more interesting” (P23) + “My opinion is that I consider it as leisure. It means if we try too hard, we become too tired and exhausted of it, we will not love it anymore. It is better if we take it easy” (P38)
Inability of changing management + Inserting adjustment of self to make more	<i>[When asked about the pressure on research outcomes)]:</i>

positive PCs with employing universities	"Actually, the requirement of publication is the first in academic profession as everywhere around the world and Vietnam, people look at CVs, the first thing they will look for is how many publications, how they are. That's it" (P17) "It is like the story of a boat, we are in the boat, the boat sinks, we cannot just cry or blame on anything. We have to find the hole and solutions. Doing this will bring positive results. An organisation, they want the proactiveness from their staff, lecturers, especially organisations in the transitional time like in Vietnam" (P25)
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First order codes

Second order codes

Pay and career and relationship with the University + Generating positive PC with other organisations

Incompatibility between pay and workload and work quality + Generating positive PC with other organisations

Career and professional development+ Generating positive PC with other organisations

Organisational recognition (self-awareness of capacity) + Generating positive PC with other organisations

No clear organisational recognition + Generating positive PC embedding on networking

Professional development opportunities + Generating positive PC embedding on networking

Lack of financial support + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality

Incompatibility between requirement of research and the workload of teaching and other activities + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality

Inability of changing management + Generating positive PC embedding on collegiality

Inability of changing management + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession

Incompatibility between Requirement of research and the workload of teaching and other activities + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession

Lack of financial support + Generating positive PC embedding on the attachment with academic profession

Inability of changing management + Inserting adjustment of self to make more positive PCs with employing universities

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