



Enriching the research culture among pracademics

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Abstract

This study explores the research culture of pracademics at a design school within a private higher education institution, focusing on pivotal areas such as institutional support for research activities, recognition of research achievements, and collaboration among academic staff. The school, being practice-oriented, employs ‘pracademics’ who balance academic and professional responsibilities, creating unique challenges and opportunities for research engagement.

A desktop-based thematic analysis was conducted, drawing on secondary data sources including institutional reports, relevant academic literature, and policy documents. These data sources were selected based on their relevance to understanding institutional research practices and their alignment with the study’s objectives. This analysis identifies the main drivers that promote and impede the development of a research culture.

While foundational support is offered, there are significant opportunities to heighten recognition and diversify collaboration to enhance the research environment. This study further proposes phased strategies for strengthening a sustainable and dynamic research culture, with a vision to inform broader practices within private higher education. Subsequent phases of this research will employ a mixed methods approach to gain deeper insights into the elements that shape, influence, and drive research culture within the nuanced context of a private higher education school.

Keywords: collaboration; design-school; institutional support; practice-oriented; research

1. Introduction

Background and Context

Research culture within higher education institutions is a critical component for academic development and institutional success. For private higher education institutions (PHEIs), particularly those with a practice-oriented focus such as design schools, building a sustainable research-rich culture presents unique challenges. Pracademics, defined by Powell et al. (2018), as an effective academic–practitioner relationship forged to foster and disseminate high-quality research and strengthen nonprofit management education, community service, voluntary

action, and philanthropic studies, often face barriers when engaging in research due to conflicting responsibilities between industry work, teaching, and academic research and balancing professional industry experience with academic duties. (Schulze, 2008).

First popularised by Posner (2009), “pracademic” refers to an individual whose career spans the boundaries of academia and practice. Academics who embrace non-academic careers within the university use their crossover skills to contribute to teaching and learning in a wide variety of ways. In addition, pracademics include those with significant experience in a field outside academe who bring their knowledge and insights from their practice to positions in higher education institutions (Both & Jacoby, 2024). This dual role gives rise to unique barriers to research engagement and subsequently research output some of which include time constraints, limited institutional support as well as conflicting priorities between professional practice and academic responsibilities.

In South Africa, where this study is based, private higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to undertake research and produce knowledge contributing to the national development needs and international scholarship, and demonstrate a culture of sustained scholarship evidenced in peer reviewed academic publications which inform teaching and learning in all its academic fields (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024) but despite the availability of institutional policies that support research, pracademics still face significant barriers to research engagement and struggle to balance their professional practice with research commitments, as research is not always a top priority (Both & Jacoby, 2024).

This study is innovative in its exploration of the specific challenges and opportunities faced by pracademics—faculty who balance both industry practice and academic responsibilities. Unlike previous studies that focus on traditional academic roles, this research uniquely contributes to the literature by focusing on private higher education institutions, specifically those with a design-oriented approach. It provides novel insights into the barriers and drivers of research engagement that are specific to this context, advancing our understanding of how pracademics can be better supported in their research activities. Despite these barriers, pracademics contribute valuable industry insights to academic programmes. This study explores these barriers and proposes strategies for improving research engagement and institutional support to cultivate a more enriched research culture among pracademics in private higher education institutions.

Having outlined the context and importance of building a research culture within PHEIs the next step is to explore the challenges faced by pracademics, leading us to the central research problem.

Research Problem

While institutional policies such as research leave and financial incentives are in place to support research engagement, pracademics underutilise these resources. The research problem stems from the lack of formal recognition, gaps in communication, and insufficient structured support for pracademics’ research activities. Despite the institutional policies that support research participation, pracademics often struggle to balance professional practice and academic responsibilities (Dickinson et al., 2022). This dual role means that pracademics face competing priorities between industry practice, teaching responsibilities, and research obligations.

The purpose of the study therefore is to explore the barriers and drivers of research engagement among pracademics in a design-oriented private higher education institution. By focusing on the unique challenges faced by pracademics who balance both industry practice and academic responsibilities, this study seeks to provide actionable insights for improving research culture

within such institutions. The purpose is to assess the institutional support structures, recognition mechanisms, and collaboration opportunities that can be enhanced to advance research engagement among pracademics, ultimately contributing to both their academic and professional growth.

The primary objective of this study is to assess and enhance the prevailing research culture among pracademics at a design-oriented private higher education institution, specifically examining the support for research activities, the recognition of research achievements and the collaboration among staff. The research objectives therefore are to:

- To examine the level of institutional support available to pracademics, focusing on aspects such as research leave, financial incentives, and mentorship programmes.
- Analyse the recognition mechanisms for research achievements within the institution and assess their impact on the research engagement of pracademics.
- Identify the barriers and drivers to research participation among pracademics, including time constraints, competing priorities, and the availability of collaboration opportunities.
- Propose actionable strategies for enhancing research engagement for a more supportive research culture within private higher education institutions, particularly those with a design focus.

The study therefore aims to contribute to the understanding of research culture in a niche school within the context of a private higher education institution. By identifying the influences of the current research environment, the study offers valuable insights into the factors that influence research productivity and collaboration. The findings will inform institutional strategies and policies aimed at enhancing research culture thereby contributing to the broader discourse on building research capacity and advancing academic excellence particularly in higher education. To address these objectives, an examination of the existing body of knowledge in the subsequent literature review is necessary which examines the research culture in higher education, focusing on the role of pracademics, their challenges and the institutional support currently in place.

Literature Review

Research Culture in Higher Education Institutions

Research culture plays a significant role in advancing academic excellence and ensuring the institution remains relevant in both national and international scholarship. Research culture can be ascribed as values and ideas that researchers use to handle research-related problems. It is the combination of all the activities, thinking, collaboration, and cooperation to promote the research in faculty members (Bhatti et al., 2022). A strong research culture is essential for enhancing an institution's reputation, supporting faculty development, and ensuring that research outputs contribute to both academic knowledge and societal development. However, private higher education institutions (PHEIs), particularly those with a practice-oriented focus such as design schools, face challenges in integrating research into their academic environments. These challenges are compounded when faculty members - pracademics, are expected to balance the dual responsibilities of industry practice and academic duties.

Pracademics: The Hybrid Role of Faculty

The concept of the pracademic has been widely discussed in higher education literature. Posner (2009) first popularised the term to describe professionals who bridge the divide between academia and practice, bringing their industry experience into the academic context.

Pracademics play a critical role in design schools, where the integration of academic theory and practical industry knowledge is crucial. According to Both and Jacoby (2024), pracademics are not only instructors but also contributors to the development of research that is rooted in real-world applications. In the literature, pracademics are often considered dual citizens because they are actively engaged in both the world of academia and practice yet exclusively belong to neither. Pracademics are a “hybrid type of specialist” who marry the best of both worlds. Pracademics in the literature tend to occupy full-time academic posts and manage to remain active in their relevant field of practice. For those self-identified pracademics, they note that their practice work is often devalued as “a lesser endeavor, an ‘outreach’ or a ‘service’ and does not always count for academic tenure or promotion”. Wilson (2019) citing Wildman (2002) argues that because of their experience at “the coalface”, these pracademics tend to have insider status and more credibility in the world of practice due to their tacit knowledge gained experientially and incrementally. This undervaluation is further reinforced by institutional biases towards traditional academic outputs, such as peer-reviewed publications, at the expense of industry and practice-based contributions. Stone (2024) highlights how traditional scholarly metrics fail to adequately capture the true value and impact of pracademics’ practical experience, perpetuating their marginalisation within academic institutions. However, access to full-time academic study is likely not practical nor affordable and engagement in many scholarly activities is likely not adequately funded. (Hollweck et al., 2021).

Role Identity Theory, applied in a recent study by Mausz et al. (2022) provides a valuable lens through which to understand the complex identities of pracademics. According to this theory, individuals hold multiple role identities that reflect their positions within various social structures. Each role carries its own expectations, behaviors and responsibilities, which often conflict significantly when these roles overlap as seen in the pracademic context. Pracademics are continually negotiating between their professional practitioner identity and their academic researcher identity, leading to role ambiguity. The study found that when individuals face dissonance due to their inability to fulfil the demands and expectations of salient professional roles, it leads to increased psychological distress and emotional exhaustion. This phenomenon, known as role dissonance, is particularly applicable to pracademics who frequently navigate the tension between their academic responsibilities and their professional industry roles. This ongoing negotiation and role conflict may negatively affect their psychological wellbeing and diminish their overall engagement in research activities.

Such role negotiation pressures pracademics to prioritise roles offering immediate professional recognition over those providing academic credibility (Stone, 2024). Despite their industry expertise, pracademics often face significant barriers when it comes to engaging in academic research. These barriers include a lack of institutional support, insufficient recognition of their contributions, and the inherent conflict between their professional responsibilities and academic commitments. As Schulze (2008) points out, pracademics may perceive research as a secondary priority to their teaching and professional practice duties, which leads to low research output. This gap between research engagement and professional practice limits the potential for pracademics to contribute meaningfully to scholarly knowledge and weakens the overall research culture within institutions.

Barriers to Research Engagement

A range of barriers to research engagement among pracademics has been identified in the literature. One of the most significant barriers is time constraints. Many pracademics report that the demands of both teaching and professional industry practice leave them with limited time to devote to research activities (Loggerenberg et al., 2021). Schulze (2008) identifies that pracademics often work long hours to maintain industry ties and fulfill their academic

responsibilities, leaving little time for research. The challenge of balancing these dual roles leads to low levels of research productivity and prevents pracademics from engaging in more ambitious research projects that could further enhance the academic reputation of their institution. In another study by Nguyen et al. (2016), most participants indicated a heavy teaching load as a barrier to engaging in research activities indicating they have to teach many hours and did not have enough time for research.

A second significant barrier is the lack of motivation for research. The increasing commercialization of academia may pressure pracademics to prioritise practical outcomes over rigorous research, potentially undermining academic standards. (Franks et al., 2024). Many pracademics are more invested in their industry practice than in academic research, which they may perceive as less directly beneficial to their professional development (Dickinson et al., 2022). This perception is often reinforced by a lack of formal recognition for research achievements within the academic institution, which undermines the perceived value of research as a part of pracademics' roles. According to Loggerenberg et al. (2021), research output is often not linked to career advancement or promotion, leading to a lack of incentive to prioritise research. Denny et al. (2025) highlight additional barriers arising from misaligned incentives between academia and practice. They argue that traditional academic reward systems (publication-focused) often conflict with practical, actionable outcomes values by industry. Furthermore, institutional support for research remains insufficient. Despite the presence of institutional policies such as research leave and financial incentives, these resources are often underutilized because they are not effectively communicated to pracademics. Volpe and Chandler (1999) argue that the lack of clear support mechanisms, such as formal mentorship programmes or structured research time, prevents pracademics from fully engaging in research. This lack of structured support systems significantly limits the ability of pracademics to integrate research into their academic practices effectively. A recent study by Lee et al. (2024), suggests mentorship for researchers can be beneficial for the novice researcher, the more experienced researcher and the institution, with the development of skills to ensure research standards are upheld and research integrity is maintained. Careful consideration to select appropriate mentors needs to be part of early career training for researchers.

Institutional Support for Research Engagement

Effective institutional support plays a crucial role in promoting and advancing a productive research culture. According to Lee et al. (2024), one of the biggest enablers reported by the majority of researchers across all professions was having a mentor or working in a team with more experienced researchers. Effective mentorship programmes are crucial for helping emerging researchers, especially those balancing industry practice with academic responsibilities, by offering guidance, resources, and the necessary academic support to integrate research into their professional roles. However, pracademics in design schools often report that mentorship programmes are underdeveloped or non-existent, and research leave is either not communicated effectively or not used. This lack of formalised support prevents pracademics from transitioning effectively into research roles and limits the institutional investment in their scholarly development.

Loggerenberg et al. (2021), further suggest that financial incentives and protected research time are critical for supporting research activities. When pracademics are not given sufficient time or resources to dedicate to research, their ability to produce meaningful scholarly work is diminished. Moreover, financial incentives such as research grants and conference funding are crucial to encouraging pracademics to engage in research activities. However, pracademics often face difficulties accessing these resources due to unclear policies or a lack of

communication from the institution or lack of financial grants from private higher education institutions. Recent literature suggests broader policy support can strengthen pracademic engagement. Zenck Huerta and Merchán (2024) describe a “pracademic framework” involving institutional policies that actively support and incentivise community engagement, arguing that institutions must encourage structured partnerships and clear incentives to maximise the impact of pracademic work. Dual

Recognition of Research Achievements

Recognition plays a crucial role in motivating pracademics to prioritize research. According to Dickinson et al. (2022), when research achievements are not formally recognised or linked to career advancement, pracademics may perceive little incentive to prioritise research, ultimately hindering their research engagement and productivity. The literature supports the need for formal recognition systems that tie research output to career progression, as scholarly output is often an overlooked component of faculty evaluations.

Moreover, the lack of recognition for pracademics' research contributes to their marginalisation within the institution. As Dickinson et al. (2022) suggest, without formal recognition, pracademics are less likely to see research as a core part of their roles, which affects their motivation to engage in long-term, high-quality research projects. Stone (2024) further emphasizes institutional undervaluation of practical engagement, asserting that universities consistently prioritize traditional scholarly outputs over real-world impact, thereby marginalizing pracademic contributions. To address this, institutional cultures must evolve to acknowledge and reward practical expertise and community-oriented research equally with traditional academic scholarship.

Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Research

Collaboration is a central driver of research productivity and quality. According to Milián Bernal (2023), fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships between academia and industry are key to producing relevant, impactful research. In pracademic roles, collaboration offers pracademics the opportunity to connect academic knowledge with industry experience, leading to more practice-based research that meets real-world needs. However, pracademics report that institutional policies often fail to create structured opportunities for collaboration, either within the institution or with industry partners.

Nguyen et al. (2016), report that research collaboration which involves building a relationship in research matters, maintaining the relationship with colleagues, and using it for achieving research goals has proved to be a useful way of enhancing research productivity. They go on to report that collaboration occurs between colleagues in different ways, such as being co-author in a publication, or working together in a research team. This can easily take place in an environment where academics have the same research interests, knowledge, and shared goals and values. It is emphasised that collaboration should frequently and intensively occur in order to maintain research motivation among colleagues. Regular collaborations create a supportive culture of research among staff. This culture gradually leads to greater success and higher productivity in research outputs. Dickinson et al. (2022), emphasise the importance of establishing formal collaboration programmes, which could enhance pracademics' ability to engage in industry-driven research. The Research Hub and research centres within many institutions could play a crucial role in facilitating such collaborations, but its potential remains underutilised. Research hubs facilitate interactions among researchers from various disciplines, promoting knowledge exchange and collaborative projects. They provide physical and virtual spaces for brainstorming and co-creation, which are essential for innovative solutions (Egessa

& Mwadzogo, 2024). A more structured approach to collaboration could therefore help pracademics overcome the isolation they often experience in their research roles.

The Role of Industry Experience in Research

Pracademics' extensive industry experience is a significant advantage for research, as it brings practical, real-world insights into academic scholarship. Hollweck et al. (2021) states that the possibilities that come with the cross-fertilization of knowledge, ideas and interactions can result in not only new possibilities of understanding the challenges and contexts we find ourselves in, but individuals may voluntarily or involuntarily begin to acquire a new understanding of who they are, or who they want to be as a result of the knowledge exchange, and collaboration within and across spaces. This practical knowledge often leads to research topics that address immediate industry needs and contribute directly to the development of professional practice. However, pracademics often struggle to translate their professional expertise into academic research because institutional systems fail to provide the necessary support for this transition. Pousadela et al. (2025) similarly argue that pracademics' hybrid positions enable them to mediate theory into practice, often facilitating innovative methods of knowledge production that bridge academic rigor and practical relevance. They recommend that institutions recognize pracademics as critical boundary-spanners whose dual expertise significantly contributes to applied research and social impact.

The literature review confirms that pracademics face numerous challenges when it comes to research engagement, including time constraints, lack of motivation, insufficient institutional support, and the lack of formal recognition systems. While industry experience is a significant driver of research engagement, it is often not fully utilised by institutions that fail to create structured opportunities for collaboration and recognition. This highlights the need for policy changes and support systems that address these barriers and help pracademics integrate research into their academic roles.

Having established the theoretical background and identified gaps in literature, this study now turns to the methodological approach which outlines the research design and methodology adopted to investigate the research culture among pracademics.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a desktop-based thematic analysis methodology to explore the research culture among pracademics at a design-oriented private higher education institution. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that allows for the identification of key themes, patterns, and insights from existing data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the nature of the research problem, which focuses on understanding the barriers and drivers to research engagement among pracademics, a thematic analysis is well-suited for identifying the recurring themes related to institutional support, recognition of research achievements, and collaboration (Dickinson et al., 2022; Loggerenberg et al., 2021), all key factors that influence research engagement among pracademics.

By applying thematic analysis to secondary data sources, this study gains insight into how institutional practices and structures impact the research behaviour of pracademics. However, it is acknowledged that a limitation of this approach is the reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture the personal experiences or nuanced perspective of pracademics. The lack of primary data (such as interviews or surveys) restricts the ability to triangulate the findings and explore individual perspectives in more depth. Future research in phase 2 of the

study will integrate primary data collection to explore deeper and subjective understanding of pracademics.

Data Sources

The data used in this study were obtained from secondary data sources and selected based on their relevance to the study. These included:

Institutional Reports: These include documents such as research output reports, annual academic reviews, and research strategy documents. These reports provide insight into the current state of research engagement and support structures at the institution, offering information on research leave, financial incentives, and mentorship programmes.

Policy Documents: This includes key research policy and procedure documents that outline the formal policies governing research engagement, institutional support, and recognition mechanisms for academic staff.

Academic Literature: Relevant academic articles and studies on pracademics, research culture, and barriers to research engagement were reviewed. Key studies include Hollweck et al. (2021) which contributes to and stimulates a continuing and evolving conversation around pracademia, and Loggerenberg et al. (2021), which explores the role of recognition systems in motivating research engagement.

By analysing these secondary sources, the study captures institutional-level trends and insights into how research engagement is facilitated or hindered for pracademics. It is noted that while secondary data can provide a broad view of institutional practices, it may not reflect the detailed lived experiences of individual pracademics.

Data Coding Process

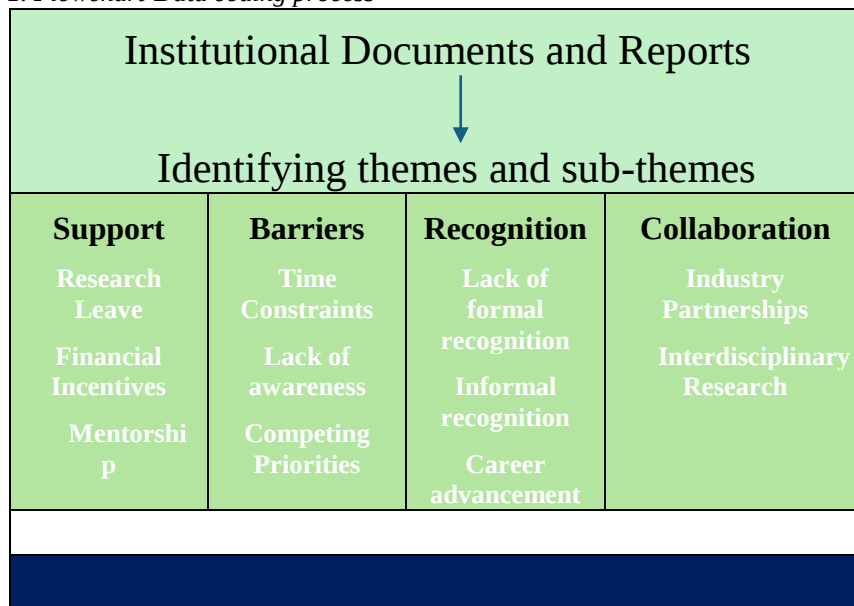
The data from the institutional documents were analysed using a thematic coding process following an iterative approach to identify recurring patterns and key themes aligned to the research objectives. The coding process was divided into the following steps:

1. **Initial reading and Familiarisation:** The data sources were initially reviewed to gain an understanding of the context of research culture at the institution and to identify emerging themes related to research barriers and drivers.
2. **Inductive and Deductive Coding:** Both inductive and deductive coding methods were employed to categorise the data. Inductive analysis involves reading through the data and identifying codes, categories, patterns, and themes as they emerge while deductive coding was used to identify themes (Bingham, 2023). Inductive coding allowed themes and patterns to emerge naturally from the data, while deductive coding applied existing theoretical frameworks to identify pre-defined themes such as research barriers (e.g. time constraints, lack of support).
3. **Grouping codes into themes:** Through an iterative analysis process the data was grouped into four main themes based on the recurrent patterns identified:
 - **Institutional Support:** This theme covered aspects such as research leave, financial incentives, mentorship, and protected research time.
 - **Research Barriers:** Key barriers included time constraints, lack of motivation, and competing priorities.
 - **Recognition of Research Achievements:** This theme focused on the presence (or absence) of formal systems to recognise research contributions and tie research output to promotion or career advancement.

- Collaboration: This theme identified opportunities (or lack thereof) for industry partnerships, departmental collaboration, and interdisciplinary research.
4. Refinement and Validation: A careful review process was conducted to refine the identified themes. To ensure consistency and accuracy, the data was checked, for reliability, ensuring that the themes truly reflected the content of the responses and the institutional context.

Figure 1 shows the data coding process flow, which illustrates the process of coding the data into broader themes. This flowchart helps visually represent the coding structure ensuring that the themes were consistently applied across the data sources.

Figure 1. Flowchart-Data coding process



Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and patterns in the data. As described previously in the methodology, data was systematically organized into themes using Excel, facilitating easy sorting, comparison and analysis of patterns. This structured approach ensured consistency, accuracy and reliability, enabling clear identification of the relationships between institutional support, barriers to engagement, recognition systems and collaboration opportunities.

Themes were analysed to assess their impact on the overall research culture within the institution and to identify the areas in which improvements are needed. For example, barriers to research engagement, such as time constraints and lack of recognition, were analysed to determine their relationship with the support structures in place. The analysis revealed that while institutional support mechanisms exist, they are often underutilized due to poor communication and lack of formal recognition.

Thematic analysis of the coded data identified recurring themes related to barriers and drivers of research engagement. While thematic analysis is appropriate for identifying patterns and insights from existing data, one limitation of this study is the reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture the nuances of pracademics' lived experiences. Additionally, the absence of primary data, such as interviews or surveys, may limit the depth of understanding of

individual perspectives on research engagement. Nonetheless, the data analyzed provided meaningful insights into the institutional factors influencing research engagement among pracademics and allowed for the identification of key drivers and barriers to research engagement among pracademics.

Barriers to Research Engagement:

In the thematic analysis,

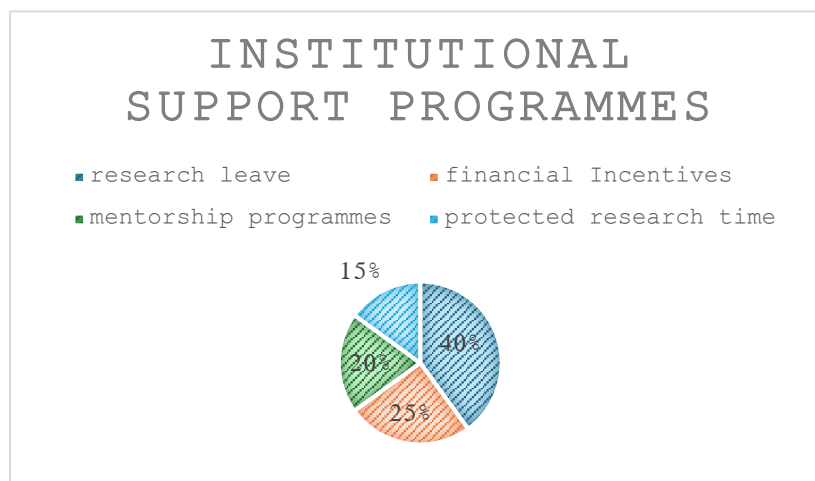
- **time constraints,**
- **lack of motivation and**
- **competing priorities;** were identified as key barriers to research engagement. The lack of formal recognition and insufficient communication about available support programmes were also recurrent themes. These barriers clearly reflect the challenges pracademics face when balancing their academic and industry roles, further compounded by competing institutional priorities.

Drivers for Research Engagement:

The thematic analysis also identified several drivers that positively influence research engagement. These included:

- **Industry experience and relevance,** which allow pracademics to bring real-world insights into their research, leading to innovative and practice-based studies.
- **Institutional support programmes** and
- **Interdisciplinary collaborations,** which emerge as crucial enablers of research engagement. However, the analysis also found that while such programmes are present, they are often underutilised due to a lack of structured communication and recognition systems.

Figure 2 Institutional Support Programmes



The pie chart shows the proportion of different types of support available and their relative importance in the institution. Research leave is the most prevalent form of support, followed by financial incentives and mentorship programmes.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, followed by a discussion of how these results relate to the identified challenges and opportunities for enhancing research engagement among pracademics.

Institutional Support for Research Activities

Research leave and financial incentives are available, but many pracademics are unaware of these opportunities (Loggerenberg et al. 2021). This suggests that merely having institutional support structures in place is insufficient if they are not effectively communicated and integrated into the academic environment. Mentorship programmes are informal and unstructured, hindering effective guidance for pracademics further limiting research participation. Structured mentorship programmes enhance early-career research engagement and bridge institutional policy with practical application (Lee et al., 2024).

Furthermore, careful consideration to select appropriate mentors needs to be part of early career training for researchers. The establishment of a mentor programme for researchers should consider the possible benefits of collaboration by linking mentors across professions (Lee et al., 2024) and move from passive policy implementation to active engagement strategies.

Research Barriers

Time constraints were the most frequently cited barrier, as pracademics face competing demands from teaching and industry. This barrier is repeatedly referenced in the existing literature and is not uncommon among clinician researchers globally (Lee et al., 2024). Without intervention, research will continue to be undermined. A practical implication of this finding is the need for institutions to introduce protected research time that allows pracademics to dedicate structured hours to scholarly work without compromising their professional and teaching obligations.

Recognition of Research Achievements

One key finding was the absence of formal recognition systems linking research productivity to career advancement. This lack of formal integration between research and career advancement reduces the motivation for pracademics to prioritize research. Currently, research output is not formally integrated into performance evaluations or promotion criteria which results in research being perceived by pracademics as a secondary priority. Institutions that have successfully linked research output to career progression have reported increased research productivity (Dickinson et al., 2022).

Therefore, hierarchical support for researchers, through rostering of quarantined research time would demonstrate recognition of the value of research (Lee et al., 2024) and incorporating clear performance incentives for research, could significantly enhance motivation.

Collaboration Among Staff

While collaboration is encouraged, it is often informal and departmental, with little cross-disciplinary or industry collaboration. Formalising collaboration, possibly through structured mentorship programmes and the creation of clear research pathways, will enhance research output and engagement. The Research Hub has limited reach, and pracademics report a lack of structured opportunities for collaboration. Given that pracademics maintain strong industry relations, formalizing research partnerships with these industry stakeholders could prove to be a valuable approach to enhancing research engagement. This can be facilitated by expanding existing Research Hubs to support industry-academic partnerships in turn providing pracademics with structured opportunities to translate industry experience into research that is impactful (Dickinson et al., 2022).

Key Implications for Institutional Strategy

In summary the findings suggest that while institutional policies exist to support research, the implementation of these policies is often ineffective. Pracademics report feeling disconnected

from research opportunities due to poor communication and lack of recognition. Institutional support, though available, is often underutilised because it is informal and ineffective. These barriers can be mitigated through formal recognition, structured mentorship programmes, and industry-academic partnerships (Dickinson et al., 2022).

The role of industry experience as a driver for research engagement cannot be overstated. Pracademics bring valuable real-world insights that can lead to innovative research. However, these contributions are often not recognised by the institution. Formalising collaboration (possibly through mentorship programmes) and creating clear research pathways will enhance research output and engagement.

Based on the findings and supported by literature, it is recommended that institutions implement formalized mentorship programmes that are specifically designed to support pracademics in balancing both the research and industry roles. Moreover, a distinct system of recognition that is tied to career progression as well as to promotions would increase motivation and research productivity. Institutions should focus on active promotion and integration of resources into the academic culture. Establishing structured collaboration opportunities, by expanding the reach for interdisciplinary research through the already established Research Hub and formalizing interdisciplinary research clusters and industry-academic partnerships will increase both the impact and the innovation of research output. Egessa & Mwadzogo (2024) clearly state that there are benefits to the universities that host innovation centres and research hubs including: contribution to a better society; increase in the quality of the research; increase in the reputation and visibility of the universities; and generation of income through innovative outputs (products, processes, services, policies or ideas).

Based on the above discussion and analysis, several recommendations for improving the research culture among pracademics are proposed. The final section presents a summary of these insights and outlines potential avenues for future research.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study identifies significant barriers to research engagement among pracademics, including time constraints, lack of formal recognition, and insufficient support. However, drivers such as industry relevance and interdisciplinary collaboration provide opportunities to enhance research engagement.

Recommendations and Practical Applications

The following actionable steps provide a roadmap for institutions to implement these findings in practice:

Formalised Research Recognition Systems:

- Establish clear systems to recognise research achievements, linked to promotion and career advancement.
- Revise promotion criteria to explicitly include research contributions, particularly applied and practice-based research
- Introduce institutional research awards to celebrate pracademics' research achievements and reinforce the importance of research within career progression

Expand and Formalise Mentorship Programmes:

- Develop structured mentorship programmes that pair experienced researchers with pracademics to guide them in research while balancing industry responsibilities.
- Create cross-departmental mentorship opportunities to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Encourage and Expand Interdisciplinary and Industry Collaboration:

- Develop structured industry-academic partnerships and interdisciplinary research programmes to enhance research output.
- Strengthen the Research Hub by formalizing interdisciplinary research clusters where pracademics can partner with faculty across departments.
- Consider providing internal funding for research projects that demonstrate strong industry relevance.

Increase Protected Research Time:

- Allocate more protected time for pracademics to engage in research without compromising their professional roles by adjusting workloads.

Improving Communication and Awareness of Research Support

- Conduct institution-wide research briefing to ensure awareness of available research leave, financial incentives and collaboration opportunities
- Establish a centralized research portal where pracademic can access research policies, mentorship programmes, funding opportunities, and collaboration requests

By implementing these strategies, institutions can move beyond passive policy adoption to active engagement, ensuring pracademics are supported, motivated and empowered to contribute meaningfully to the research culture.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research: Phase 2

While this study has provided valuable insights into the research culture among pracademics as a design-oriented private higher education institution, there are several limitations worth noting. Firstly, the reliance solely on secondary data sources, such as institutional reports, policy documents and academic literature, implies that the findings might not fully capture the experiential reality and perceptions of pracademics themselves. The absence of primary data, like direct feedback through interviews or through surveys, limits the depth of understanding and the ability to triangulate findings to confirm accuracy and representativeness comprehensively.

Secondly, due to the absence of primary data, the results lack first-hand accounts that could further enrich the analysis. Pracademics' individual experiences, perspectives and insights could offer additional depth, highlighting the complexity of balancing professional practice with teaching responsibilities and research engagement.

Finally, the generalizability of the findings may be somewhat restricted, given that the research was conducted within a specific context – a design-oriented private higher education institution. The unique challenges and opportunities experienced by pracademics in other institutions, particularly those in different disciplines or institutional structures, might differ substantially.

Given these limitations, future research is recommended to extend this foundational study by incorporating primary data collection to strengthen and validate the existing findings.

Therefore, the next phase of this research, aims to build upon this initial desktop-based thematic analysis through a mixed methods approach, incorporating quantitative surveys to gather broader and generalizable data thereby enhancing the validity of the study. Furthermore, qualitative interviews with pracademics will be incorporated to capture personal insights, lived experiences and deeper contextual understanding of the drivers and barriers identified in the current study. This combined approach aims to ensure comprehensive data analysis, which will

facilitate a richer understanding of pracademics research engagement. Ultimately this integrated approach aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for institutional policy and practice improvements.

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