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Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education. If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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INTERSECTIONALITY AND ACADEMIC MARGINALISATION: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN SCHOLARS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Black women academics in South African higher education face persistent systemic inequalities that hinder their professional growth and sense of belonging. Within the University of South Africa's College of Education, these challenges manifest as marginalisation, limited mentorship, and restricted opportunities for research development. This study explored the lived experiences of Black women scholars, examining how institutional culture and structural barriers shape their academic identities and career trajectories. Guided by Black Feminist Thought, the research emphasised the intersections of race, gender, and power, highlighting how these factors influence access, recognition, and professional agency. Using a phenomenological design within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm, in-depth interviews captured participants' experiences verbatim to preserve authenticity. Findings reveal that participants frequently lack module ownership, encounter racism, and feel alienated from colleagues, both Black and White. Limited mentorship, insufficient postgraduate supervision support, and exclusion from research networks further constrain their advancement. Despite these challenges, the CEDU mentorship programme was positively regarded for fostering collaboration and inclusion. The study underscores the need for institutional policies and structured mentorship initiatives to address intersectional inequities, promote professional empowerment, and create inclusive academic environments where Black women scholars can thrive, contribute meaningfully, and advance equitably in higher education.

Keywords: *Black women; Feminist; inequalities; mentorship; Open Distance Learning*

Introduction and Background

Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, South Africa has made notable strides toward gender equality, with women increasingly occupying leadership positions in politics, business, and academia. The end of apartheid opened spaces previously dominated by White

men, enabling previously marginalised groups, particularly Black women, to enter higher education leadership roles. According to Hlatshwayo et al. (2022), South Africa's higher education system has been tasked with redressing inequities left by apartheid, particularly in leadership positions. Policy initiatives

aimed at increasing gender representation and promoting inclusivity have supported this transformation (Moody & Toni, 2019; Potokri & Perumal, 2018; Kele & Pietersen, 2015). Women's leadership in higher education has thus become central to fostering equitable institutional environments and inclusive decision-making.

Despite these gains, systemic barriers persist, limiting the professional growth and sense of belonging of Black women academics. Issues such as gender-based discrimination, cultural expectations, unequal access to resources, and pay gaps continue to hinder advancement. Zulu (2021, p. 241) observes:

Black women are therefore often victims of both sexist and racist subjugation, which establishes a unique double intersectional burden for them. Despite the introduction of inclusive policies that enable accessibility to higher education among students and staff from different races and backgrounds, the legacy of the apartheid system persists even decades later.

Similarly, Mdleleni et al. (2021, p. 124) note:

These barriers include, but are not limited to, the male dominant location of power in the workplace as well as systemic challenges within existing university structures. Women must adopt male standards of leadership, as women are often viewed as emotional and subjective; whereas men are viewed as rational and objective and if they want to be taken

seriously, they need to act out of character.

Academics are entrusted with teaching and producing knowledge that contributes to institutional development and societal progress. Research plays a central role in academic identity and institutional performance, providing legitimacy and recognition (Nkumane, 2018). Inclusive participation in research is therefore essential for diversifying knowledge production and addressing historical inequalities.

The University of South Africa (UNISA), as the largest open distance learning institution on the African continent, is critical in expanding access and supporting research outputs (Nkumane, 2018). Despite employing Black women academics, their participation in research initiatives has been historically underrepresented. The 2008 UNISA Women in Research (WIR) Audit highlighted the predominance of White women participants and did not report on Black women academics (Tustin & Moshoeu, 2008), raising questions about their visibility and engagement in institutional knowledge production.

Globally, Black women academics face similar challenges. In the United States, Tillman (2012) notes that Black women frequently encounter unwelcoming institutional climates, exclusion from research networks, limited mentorship, and additional mentoring burdens. In the United Kingdom, Black women report professional invisibility and exclusion from research opportunities (Maylor, 2009). Hlatshwayo et al. (2022, p. 17) emphasise:

Gender stereotypes in leadership in higher education must be thoroughly addressed and addressed promptly, especially in South Africa. A clear message must emerge that women are capable of performing in the same leadership positions as men in higher education. Women should not be discouraged from pursuing their desire to be in leadership positions in higher education, especially if they are qualified, capable, competent, and have the necessary ability, knowledge, and skill to lead successfully in positions in higher education. The major goal of patriarchy in higher education was unavoidably to secure male domination and female obedience, which encourages gender inequity.

Similar structural challenges are reported across African universities, including limited institutional support, unequal professional development, and heavy workloads that constrain research productivity and promotion (Prah, 2002; Yusuf, 2014). In South Africa, historically White institutions have perpetuated structural inequalities affecting Black women academics (Mabokela, 2002). Despite global and continental research, limited studies examine the experiences of Black women academics at UNISA. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the barriers they face, and the support needed to strengthen their research participation and professional development.

Research questions

Therefore, the following questions were developed to clarify the challenges faced

by women in South African higher education:

- a) How do Black women academics experience ownership and responsibility for developing and delivering ODL modules?
- b) What challenges do novice Black women lecturers face teaching ODL modules, and how can orientation support them?
- c) How do perceptions of qualifications affect Black women academics' confidence, credibility, and experiences in ODL teaching?

Literature review

History of gender Inequality in South African higher education

South African higher education has been marked by harsh and severe inequalities, especially for women. According to Sekgobela et al (2024, p. 368), Gender inequality at South African institutions of higher learning takes many forms, such as unequal representation in particular academic fields, the maintenance of gender stereotypes, sexual harassment, representation in student leadership and violence against women. This view was supported by Moodley and Toni (2017) who write that within South African universities, women who reach senior academic positions often arrive with already internalised perceptions of leadership shaped by family and societal influences. After entering academia, the institutional construction of leadership roles continues to be influenced by traditionally masculine paradigms. These dynamics limit the ways in which women can exercise authority and influence, often requiring them to navigate complex social expectations and professional norms. This view was supported by

Singh et al. (2024, p. 267), who mention that:

The evolution of South African women in higher education is a testament to their resilience and determination in the face of systemic challenges. From the oppressive conditions of the colonial and apartheid eras to the strides made in the democratic era, South African women have continually fought for and achieved greater access to education.

Based on this statement, it is evident that despite historical and structural barriers, South African women academics demonstrate remarkable perseverance and agency, negotiating both cultural and institutional constraints to advance professionally and contribute meaningfully to the academy.

Challenges in Leadership for Women in South African Higher Education

Scholars have consistently observed that women in leadership positions in South African higher education face significant challenges. Many of these obstacles are not related to women's leadership capabilities but are instead rooted in gendered norms and expectations. Because women's leadership abilities are undeniably strong, it is evident that the struggle for acceptance in leadership roles stems from entrenched patriarchal structures and restrictive cultural beliefs (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Le Roux, 2022). Le Roux (2022, p. v) emphasises that:

Women dominate the South African educational system and the country's current gender redress legislation has made leadership positions more

accessible for women. However, attaining leadership roles within the profession is often beset with political and sociocultural challenges. Although the educational leadership terrain is riddled with challenges, women who ultimately assume leadership roles invariably enact motherly tendencies and show sensitivity to social justice issues. These qualities are often consistent with servant leadership characteristics such as nurturance, care, and an attitude of social justice – but are often devalued.

Based on this statement, while women continue to achieve leadership positions, their contributions are frequently undermined by systemic barriers and cultural biases. These challenges highlight the persistent tension between formal access to leadership and the undervaluation of leadership styles traditionally associated with women, including empathy, collaboration, and social justice orientation.

Despite extensive research on women in higher education, the experiences of Black women academics in South Africa remain underexplored. Most studies focus on representation or leadership in predominantly White institutions, neglecting intersectional factors of race and gender (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Le Roux, 2022). Limited attention is given to mentorship, institutional support, research participation, and coping strategies. While Singh et al. (2024, p. 267) acknowledge women's resilience, empirical insights into how Black women navigate systemic and cultural barriers are scarce, leaving critical gaps in knowledge and policy guidance.

Theoretical framework

The Gender Schema Theory (GST) offers an important lens for understanding how perceptions of sex and gender are developed and how they influence behaviour. McVee et al. (2005) define a schema as a mental framework that shapes how individuals perceive themselves, others, and situations, while a theory is described as “a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that informs research” (Schurink, 2009, p. 86). GST asserts that individuals internalise cognitive structures, or schemata, during childhood, shaped by cultural norms that define gender roles and expectations (Plant & Stanton, 2014, p. 4).

Scholars such as Patsiomitou (2025) describe schemata as active mental templates constructed through interactions with physical and social environments, organising knowledge and interpreting new information. Bem’s five propositions emphasise that gender schemas guide perception, self-concept, and social judgement, shaping what is considered appropriate or valued for men and women. In this study, GST was adopted to explore how Black women academics are perceived in higher education, recognising that cultural gender schemas formed in childhood continue to influence adult expectations and professional interactions.

Sociocultural theory complements GST by emphasising the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping human cognition and development. Vygotsky (cited in Scott & Palinscar, 2013, p.1) underscores that learning occurs through social interactions within a cultural environment, highlighting themes such as the genetic law of development, mediation through tools and signs, and

the zone of proximal development (ZPD). McLeod (2022) further highlights that community and social interaction are central to constructing meaning, reinforcing the notion that cognition is socially embedded. This perspective situates the experiences of Black women academics within broader institutional, historical, and cultural contexts, demonstrating that professional development is influenced not only by individual ability but also by social structures and norms shaping perceptions of gender and competence. Africana womanism provides a third theoretical perspective that centres the experiences and empowerment of women of African descent. Hudson-Weems critiques feminism and Black feminism for excluding African women and emphasises race, community, and cultural identity alongside gender (Hudson-Weems, cited in Aldridge & Young, 2000, p.205). Africana womanism positions African women within their ancestral and cultural contexts, prioritising race empowerment, family, and communal survival while acknowledging gender dynamics (Pellerin, 2012, pp. 76–77). In this study, the theory allows for an analysis of Black women academics’ experiences in South Africa through the lens of their historical, racial, and cultural realities.

The integration of GST, sociocultural theory, and Africana womanism provides a multidimensional framework for analysing the lived experiences of Black women academics. GST explains cognitive frameworks and gender expectations that shape perceptions and behaviour in professional environments. Sociocultural theory contextualises these perceptions within broader social and institutional structures. Africana

womanism foregrounds the historical, racial, and communal realities of African women. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive foundation for examining how gendered, cultural, and racial factors intersect to shape the professional journeys of Black women academics in higher education

Research Design and Methods

A qualitative approach guided this study, employing a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Black women academic researchers at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The design enabled the study to focus on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of their academic and professional realities within the institution. Phenomenology was particularly suitable for examining how individuals make meaning of their experiences and how these meanings shape their perceptions of institutional culture and professional identity (Bhar, 2019; Dodgson, 2023). The study was situated within an interpretive research paradigm, which acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and understood through individuals' perspectives and interactions with their environment (Bhar, 2019; Dodgson, 2023). Within this paradigm, participants' narratives and reflections were prioritised in order to capture nuanced insights into their lived experiences. Narrative inquiry further informed the research process, allowing participants to express their experiences through personal accounts and reflections. This approach enabled the study to capture detailed descriptions of participants' academic journeys and the institutional dynamics influencing their professional development.

Data Collection and Sampling Size

Data were collected through phenomenological, in-depth interviews conducted with four Black women academics from the College of Education at UNISA. Participants were purposively selected based on specific criteria: they identified as Black women, were employed as academic staff at the institution, and had between five and thirteen years of teaching and research experience. Potential participants were identified through departmental networks and invited to participate voluntarily in the study. Although the sample size ($n=4$) was relatively small, it allowed for intensive engagement with participants and facilitated a deeper exploration of their lived experiences, which is consistent with phenomenological research that prioritises depth and richness of data over large sample sizes. Interviews were conducted in participants' offices or in the researcher's office by mutual agreement. Each interview was audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder, while field notes were taken to document contextual observations and non-verbal cues that could enrich the interpretation of participants' responses (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Hennik et al., 2011, p. 109).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis involved several systematic stages aimed at identifying patterns within participants' narratives. Interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate representation of participants' accounts. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to familiarise the researcher with the data and identify meaningful units of text. Coding was conducted by segmenting the transcripts

into categories that reflected recurring ideas and experiences, after which related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. These themes were subsequently refined and interpreted to represent shared experiences and institutional dynamics influencing the professional lives of the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 367). Throughout the analysis, verbatim quotations were retained to ensure that participants' voices remained central to the interpretation of findings and to enhance the credibility of the study.

Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained: ethical clearance was obtained from UNISA's Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2014 OCTOBER/4726480/MC), and institutional permission was granted (Ref: 2015_RPSC_088). Participants were provided with letters explaining the purpose of the article, confidentiality assurances, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview ensuring that the research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and that participants' rights were fully protected.

Research findings

The findings of this article revealed three key themes related to teaching and learning experiences of Black women academics. First, participants expressed a lack of ownership over the modules they were assigned, affecting their engagement and sense of responsibility. Second, there was a clear need for structured orientation and support for novice lecturers teaching Open Distance Learning (ODL) modules. Third, participants' qualifications were often questioned, impacting their credibility and professional confidence within the

academic environment. These themes highlight systemic and individual challenges in ODL teaching.

No Ownership of Modules

Teaching and learning remain the core responsibilities of academic staff in higher education institutions. Within this role, lecturers are typically assigned either as primary or secondary lecturers for specific modules. Primary lecturers, often regarded as module coordinators, carry significant responsibilities, including curriculum design, development of tutorial letters, and oversight of assessments. Secondary lecturers, by contrast, primarily assist the primary lecturer and often lack the autonomy to make substantial decisions regarding the module.

The participants in this study expressed a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction arising from their long-term assignment as secondary lecturers, which prevented them from developing a sense of ownership over the modules they taught. Participant 1 described her experience:

First of all, the modules I was hired to teach in this institution since I came, I have never felt like this is my module. Since I came, I got this professor teaching the module, or in fact, it was two professors then it was two of us who were hired to come and do this module and we were always treated like we were assistants to these professors.

This narrative highlights her perception of being treated as an assistant rather than a co-owner of the modules. Such a position limited her professional growth and prevented her from exercising meaningful responsibility (Nkumane, 2018; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). The

concept of ownership is central to professional autonomy and engagement. When lecturers cannot influence decisions regarding curriculum, assessments, or pedagogy, their sense of agency diminishes, which can negatively impact teaching quality, morale, and overall job satisfaction. Hinton (2009, p. 395) describes similar circumstances as marginalisation within the academy, where Black women often occupy an “outsider-within” status shaped by intersections of race, class, and gender. The lack of module ownership appeared closely linked to UNISA’s institutional culture. Participant 2 reflected on the tendency of long-serving academics to assert control over modules:

I actually got to understand that later, that at Unisa there is this thing of people wanting to own modules. And when you own a module, when somebody comes in, you think that this person wants to take over and you still want to, there was this thing that if you have been teaching the module for ten years, and you feel that it is your module, anybody who comes in, you want them to operate on your terms.

This observation suggests that entrenched ownership by primary lecturers can create significant barriers for newcomers relegated to secondary roles. Such a culture discourages innovation and limits contributions from newer staff, as primary lecturers may resist changes or alternative perspectives. Participant 4 reinforced this sentiment:

When I attended I was just a secondary lecturer. You know if you are secondary lecturer, you don't have much to say. That is

my problem, you don't have much to say.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a professional environment where Black women academics may feel marginalised and excluded from decision-making processes. Limited ownership reduces motivation, restricts engagement, and hinders the development of teaching competencies associated with primary lecturer responsibilities. An exception was Participant 3, who developed her own modules due to the novelty of Education Technology at UNISA:

But I was doing technology of education and then I developed my own module, I had four modules. Ja, because the programme was new and then they didn't have modules, technology was a new thing.

The participant experiences highlight that module ownership is pivotal for professional empowerment among lecturers. Owning modules fosters confidence, professional growth, and the ability to innovate within curriculum development, while also symbolising recognition, credibility, and meaningful contribution to institutional teaching and learning. Hinton (2009) describes such dynamics as “power living,” where primary lecturers maintain control and authority over secondary lecturers. These experiences reflect broader patterns of gender inequity in higher education, particularly in South Africa, where women face structural barriers to leadership and decision-making roles (Ahrens et al., 2015; Phakeng, 2015; Shackleton et al., 2006). The study demonstrates that lack of module ownership limits autonomy, entrenches hierarchical structures, and marginalises

Black women academics. Addressing these challenges requires structured mentorship, gradual transition to primary lecturer responsibilities, and equitable access to curriculum development. Such interventions can enhance professional identity, engagement, and teaching outcomes, contributing to more inclusive and empowering academic environments.

The Need for Orientation in the Teaching of ODL Modules for Novice Lecturers

A second critical theme that emerged from the study was the need for structured orientation for novice lecturers, particularly in the context of teaching Open Distance Learning (ODL) modules. Several participants reported limited familiarity with ODL pedagogy prior to joining UNISA, highlighting a significant gap in institutional support for new staff. Effective ODL teaching requires a distinct set of skills, including the development of tutorial letters, preparation of assessments, and management of student queries through asynchronous communication platforms (Nkumane, 2018; UNISA, 2009). Without adequate orientation, novice lecturers face steep learning curves, which can negatively affect their teaching effectiveness and ultimately impact learner outcomes.

Participant 1 vividly described the challenges of beginning ODL teaching without structured guidance:

But I've never got to be oriented or to be shown the know-how of the first steps on how to do the ODL teaching you know. I was just given the tutorial letters, the tutorial letters and even there I was just a secondary lecturer in

all the modules that I have been with. So this is a challenge, I haven't yet been fully, you know, established in the teaching of all the forms.

Her narrative underscores that orientation involves far more than the mere provision of instructional materials; it necessitates practical, hands-on guidance and mentorship from experienced colleagues. Without such support, novice lecturers often experience uncertainty regarding their roles, responsibilities, and the procedural intricacies of ODL teaching. Participant 1 further proposed a solution to address this gap:

If there can be a somebody, who may be a primary lecturer, like in my case, where I have always been the secondary lecturer, if the primary lecturer can sit you down and say this is how you do one, this is how you do two, this is how you do three. Unlike the case of just being given, okay, set five questions which are what has been done, set five questions on this section, what and then you find that those questions you set, they are not even there in the question paper at the end of the day. So, it is like you are just a baby whose, I don't know what your role is.

This reflection highlights the inadequacy of passive training approaches and points to the necessity of active, mentorship-based orientation programs. Her analogy of feeling like a “baby” captures the disempowerment and confusion that novice lecturers experience when left unsupported. The need for structured mentorship resonates with the wider literature on academic socialisation,

which emphasises guided participation as critical for professional development in higher education (McLeod, 2014; Scott & Palinscar, 2013). Participant 2 corroborated the importance of orientation, revealing that she was required to independently source study materials:

But I was actually happy when I came to Unisa, I got to teach ... and you know I was actually thrown in the deep end and because most of the articles I had to source myself.

Her account reflects the absence of institutional support in preparing course materials, forcing novice lecturers to navigate content curation and instructional design on their own. The participant's experience illustrates how lack of guidance can exacerbate feelings of professional isolation and insecurity. Mabokela (2002, p. 194) similarly found that Black women lecturers often lacked guidance and support from senior colleagues, with experienced academics reluctant to share knowledge or mentor new staff. This pattern reproduces a cycle of neglect, where novice lecturers inherit the same challenges endured by previous generations, reinforcing systemic inequities in academic support structures. Participant 2 also highlighted challenges related to assignment marking:

I think the challenge was, the challenge was assignment marking. The assignments where you would be asked to take charge of the marking of the assignments, as a new person you don't have knowledge of these things, you need support, and I felt that I was being, I was being abused. I was being told to do things I had

no knowledge of, I didn't have enough support.

This statement underscores the emotional and professional toll that insufficient orientation can exert on novice lecturers. Being asked to undertake tasks for which they have no prior experience can lead to frustration, stress, and diminished confidence. Effective orientation programs, therefore, must not only provide procedural knowledge but also foster professional competence, confidence, and collegial relationships essential for navigating the complex demands of ODL teaching.

The findings align with Yusuf's (2014, p.286) study at Lagos State University, which reported that successful female professors as role models were scarce, leaving new women academics to "find their way in the dark" without guidance or mentorship. Similarly, at UNISA, the absence of structured orientation for novice lecturers in ODL teaching undermines professional confidence, reduces teaching effectiveness, and heightens isolation. These parallels underscore the importance of mentorship-based orientation programs, which provide practical skills, procedural knowledge, and collegial support. Such interventions are essential for professional development, enhancing teaching competence, and improving learner outcomes in higher education and distance education contexts.

Black Women Academics' Qualifications Were Questioned

The third prominent theme identified in this study concerns the persistent questioning of Black women academics' qualifications. Participants reported that their expertise and professional

credibility were frequently undermined by colleagues, particularly regarding their educational backgrounds and competence. These experiences contributed to feelings of marginalisation, diminished professional confidence, and a sense of being undervalued within the institution. Such questioning often arose in contexts where teaching responsibilities, module ownership disputes, or hierarchical assessments by senior academics were involved.

Participant 2 recounted an incident in which her credentials and professional knowledge were scrutinised:

So, this was the approach of the associate professor, who said you are not going to come in, then she starts assessing me, do I know the module? You know, do I really fit in? Do I know education law? Where did I do my degree? You know, all that. You know I was not feeling comfortable.

This quotation reflects the participant's discomfort with the continuous scrutiny of her qualifications, signalling a lack of trust in her abilities. Repeated questioning can create a hostile or unwelcoming work environment, where Black women academics may feel alienated despite demonstrating competence. Research has shown that women in South African higher education face numerous structural and social challenges, particularly in leadership and academic positions (Phakeng, 2015; Moodly & Toni, 2019; Potokri & Perumal, 2018; Kele & Pietersen, 2015). Women often need to exert additional effort to gain recognition, and those who succeed are frequently subjected to patriarchal and

toxic work environments (Molotsi, 2016).

The interrogation described by Participant 2 not only questioned her knowledge of the module but also implicitly challenged the legitimacy of her qualifications and the credibility of the awarding institution. She elaborated further on the racialised nature of this scrutiny:

I don't know but I think it is the thinking of our white colleagues sometimes, you know I had a feeling that when I started working at Unisa that Black academics are undermined. They are questioning your qualifications, they are questioning your integrity as an academic, they are questioning whether you deserve to be at Unisa, You know, and I think to a large extent it was about undermining your quality of education.

This reflection highlights the intersection of race and professional credibility, suggesting that her identity as a Black academic influenced the constant questioning of her qualifications. Such experiences point to systemic biases and racialised perceptions of competence within the academic institution, where the professional abilities of Black women are often devalued. Participant 3 similarly recounted experiences of interrogation regarding her academic background and professional experience:

You know because they would ask me where do you come from, this and that, you know every time you were interviewed. You know how long have you been teaching, in the end my, my

argument is always, you know, because they were asking about experience, working at Universities, and they would say that and that.

This narrative illustrates the persistent scrutiny faced by Black women academics regarding their experience and institutional affiliations. Such evaluative questioning reinforces feelings of marginalisation and professional alienation, creating an environment in which expertise is constantly challenged and undervalued.

Black women academics face barriers not only in module ownership and teaching orientation but also in the recognition and legitimacy of their qualifications. Historical assumptions about ability based on race continue to influence perceptions, undermining professional credibility. Participants' experiences reveal that their knowledge and qualifications are often assessed through a racially biased lens, intersecting with gender and professional status to limit career progression. This systemic and interpersonal marginalisation reduces confidence and diminishes opportunities for advancement. Addressing these inequities requires institutions to recognise diverse academic credentials, implement targeted mentorship, and foster inclusive practices that affirm competence and expertise regardless of race or gender.

Discussion

This article demonstrates that Black women academics in South African higher education encounter multiple systemic challenges that impede professional growth and participation in academic leadership. Central issues

include restricted module ownership, inadequate orientation for novice lecturers, and the frequent questioning of qualifications, which intersect to limit professional recognition and agency. The findings indicate that the lack of module ownership profoundly affects Black women academics' engagement and sense of authority in teaching and learning. Consistent with prior research (Hinton, 2009; Nkumane, 2018), the article reveals that being relegated to secondary lecturer positions over prolonged periods diminishes autonomy, fosters marginalisation, and reduces professional satisfaction. Module ownership, beyond functional responsibilities, represents credibility, recognition, and an opportunity to influence curriculum development. Participants unable to assume primary lecturer roles reported limited influence over teaching decisions, tutorial letter development, and assessment planning (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022).

These findings align with studies highlighting gender inequities in higher education leadership (Chabaya et al., 2009; Ahrens et al., 2015), where structural and cultural barriers marginalise women's contributions (Phakeng, 2015; Madden, 2011). Entrenched module ownership by long-serving lecturers restricts creativity and participation in knowledge production, corroborating Shackleton et al (2006).

Structured orientation emerged as a critical factor for effective Open Distance Learning (ODL) participation. Participants unfamiliar with ODL pedagogy reported navigating module preparation, tutorial letters, and assessment independently. Guidance from experienced lecturers was emphasised as essential, echoing

Chirume and Dick (2019) and Mabokela (2002), who note that mentorship enhances teaching competence and integration into academic communities. Inadequate orientation undermined confidence and professional development, with participants describing feelings of powerlessness, a pattern observed by Yusuf (2014).

The article further reveals that the qualifications of Black women academics are often questioned, reinforcing barriers to professional recognition. Participants reported routine interrogation of their degrees, experience, and disciplinary knowledge, contributing to alienation. This supports Maylor (2009), Molotsi (2016), and Moodly and Toni (2019), who argue that racialised assumptions influence perceptions of competence. Potokri and Perumal (2018) note that gatekeeping and exclusionary practices hinder career progression, illustrating how race and gender intersect to shape experiences of marginalisation.

In conclusion, the findings underscore that restricted module ownership, inadequate orientation, and questioning of qualifications collectively contribute to professional disempowerment. Addressing these systemic challenges requires institutional commitment to mentorship, recognition of expertise, and equitable practices. Implementing such measures can foster autonomy, pedagogical innovation, and meaningful career advancement for Black women academics, advancing broader goals of gender, race, and professional equity in higher education.

Recommendations and insight

The study highlights the need for systemic interventions to address the

professional marginalisation of Black women academics. Institutions should implement structured mentorship and orientation programs for novice lecturers, particularly in ODL contexts, providing guidance on module management, tutorial letter development, and assessment design to enhance competence and confidence. Equitable allocation of primary lecturer roles is essential, enabling ownership over modules, fostering innovation, and recognising contributions. Policies must address systemic biases that question qualifications, ensuring fairness, credibility, and professional recognition. Additionally, diversity training, inclusive leadership practices, and transparent evaluation processes can reduce discriminatory practices. Overall, these recommendations emphasise institutional commitment to equity, mentorship, and recognition, creating supportive environments where Black women academics can fully engage, contribute, and advance in higher education.

Limitations

This study focused on the experiences of Black women academics within UNISA's College of Education, which presents certain limitations. First, being conducted in a single institutional context means the findings cannot be generalised to all South African universities, as institutional cultures, policies, and support structures vary. Second, the qualitative phenomenological approach involved a small sample, providing rich, in-depth insights but limiting representation of all Black women academics at UNISA. Third, the study focused primarily on teaching and learning, leaving aspects such as research productivity, leadership

roles, and interdisciplinary collaborations underexplored. Finally, limited literature on Black women's experiences specifically at UNISA made direct comparisons challenging. Future research could include multiple colleges or cross-university studies to broaden understanding of systemic challenges in higher education.

Conclusion

This article examines the professional experiences of Black women academics at UNISA, focusing on three interconnected challenges: lack of module ownership, insufficient orientation in Open Distance Learning (ODL) teaching, and the questioning of qualifications. Participants reported that being relegated to secondary lecturer roles limited their professional autonomy, marginalised their contributions, and hindered opportunities for curriculum innovation. Module ownership, more than a functional task, signifies recognition, credibility, and empowerment, and its absence contributes to diminished engagement and professional growth, reflecting a sense of being an "outsider-within" the academy. Closely linked to this is the need for structured orientation and mentorship. Participants navigating ODL responsibilities without guidance experienced frustration, uncertainty, and reduced confidence, highlighting the importance of mentorship for professional integration and competence.

The third challenge involves the persistent questioning of qualifications, highlighting the intersection of race and credibility. Black women academics reported scrutiny of their degrees and expertise, reinforcing systemic biases and undermining professional legitimacy. Overall, these interconnected barriers reflect systemic, cultural, and institutional dynamics that limit professional growth and engagement. Addressing them requires institutional commitment to transparent module allocation, structured mentorship, and fair evaluation of credentials, fostering equitable, inclusive, and empowering environments for Black women academics.

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