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Community-led approaches to the academic development of pracademics in universities: evidence from Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how pracademics who teach at different universities in Ghana contribute to shaping their academic development. In this study, a pracademic refers to an industry practitioner who is employed by a university as a part-time academic to teach academic courses and support the knowledge and skills development of learners. Using a dialogical narrative approach, data were gathered from 14 pracademics who teach academic courses at different universities in Ghana. The findings revealed that the academic development of pracademics is linked to their unique professional identity, the social networks that support their personal and professional growth, and the complex professional community in which they operate. The narratives of the participants revealed that the network of pracademics serves to promote their common interests, which include needs (social, job-related, and resources), expectations, access to opportunities, and their ability to promote academic disciplines. Additionally, pracademics are likely to be highly motivated to join informal networks within a broad context – pracademia, when they know that issues concerning their job security and professional development in the areas of teaching, research, and engaged scholarship will be prioritised by the management of universities.

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Introduction

One of the important features of the transformation of the higher education sector globally is the call on universities to employ pracademics who are professionals from industry with rich practical experience to engage in intellectual activities and to support the knowledge and skills development of students. The contextualization of pracademics who are also referred to as hybrid professionals (Lam, 2020; Posner, 2009), practitioner-researchers or scholar-practitioners (Hollweck et al., 2021), seems to vary across geographical spaces. For instance, Wilson (2019) argues that in most literature, pracademics occupy full-time academic positions and are active in their field of practice. In Ghana, pracademics are often full-time industry practitioners who take up part-time academic positions in universities. In this study, the term pracademics refers to industry practitioners who are employed by universities as part-time academics to teach local and

international programmes and who may serve as members of a professional network. The major roles of pracademics include blending scholarly knowledge with industry or real-world experiences, and promoting active engagement between academia and practice-based contexts (Hollweck et al., 2021).

Over the years, pracademics employed by the universities encounter issues concerning their academic development and professional practice, especially in relation to pedagogical approaches. Other challenges include pay inequities, limited advancement opportunities, limited research support, and job insecurity due to their lack of support in university settings (Feldman & Turnley, 2004). In the wake of these challenges, not much has been investigated to reveal how the academic development needs of pracademics are addressed. The expansive literature on academic development includes the growing scope of the concept across different geographical settings (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021), among professional groups within university settings (Sutherland, 2018), and how it is characterised by complex multi-faceted identities, processes, and experiences of individuals (Le-May Sheffield & Serbati, 2022).

Despite its substantial research in global North contexts, academic development as a concept and practice has received very little attention, especially in global South environments (Parkinson et al., 2020), and in particular among the network of pracademics in higher education settings. As a consequence, it has become necessary to advance the concept of academic development beyond creating conditions that support teaching and learning (Leibowitz et al., 2015) to include a focus on academic community development (Parkinson et al., 2020). As pracademics engage with their colleagues within a professional community (Parkinson et al., 2020), they develop common interests (Kenny, 2016), which, if effectively utilized, could enhance their academic development and their professional experiences.

Using a dialogical narrative approach, this study examines how 14 pracademics who teach in different universities in Ghana navigate their professional identities, professional development, and professional practice within a professional community characterised by common experiences, needs, and access to opportunities and resources. To achieve the objectives of the current study, four research questions were developed to guide the study: research question 1 (RQ1): How do the professional identities of pracademics influence their academic development in universities? RQ2: How can professional networks promote the common interests of pracademics? RQ3: How do pracademics develop relevant skills for teaching, research, and engaged scholarship? RQ4: How do pracademics develop their professional careers within a professional community in the higher education sector? This paper discusses the terminologies around pracademics, the literature on academic development, the empirical process, the findings, and the conclusions of the study.

Pracademic as a concept

The use of the term pracademic in scholarly literature is credited to John Nalbandian who raised an important question about how professional staff could successfully coordinate council-staff relations in a local government setting (Nalbandian, 1994). Referring to the constellations of logic that separate politics from administration, Nalbandian (1994) explained the complex dual role played by a professional who serves both the needs of

the council and ensures that the administrative structure operates smoothly. Years later, other scholars (Hollweck et al., 2021; Lam, 2020; Posner, 2009) argued for the recognition of pracademics as individuals who can promote cooperation and communication among networks of actors, and in spaces of policy, practice, and academia. Different terminologies such as pracademic, pracademia, and pracademic experience are used to describe individuals, spaces, and activities that connect research, policy, and the world of practice. While a pracademic refers to an individual who simultaneously engages in scholarly activities (teaching and research), policy decisions, and a practice-based profession in a specific field, pracademia is a liminal space in which ‘practice and scholarship are simultaneously engaged with one another’ (Hollweck et al., 2021, p. 8). While the scope of pracademia spans the diverse yet interconnected domains of knowledge, expertise, practice, and experiences, its conceptualisation includes how it could serve as a channel for action across the fields of practice and academia, extending beyond the boundaries of practice-based professions (Hollweck et al., 2021). Pracademic experience, on the other hand, explains a concerted relationship between researchers and practitioners (Hollweck et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2018).

The academic development of pracademics

Although there is no universally accepted definition of academic development as a concept (Le-May Sheffield & Serbati, 2022; Sutherland, 2018), the use of the term in the context of the *International Journal for Academic Development* (IJAD) needs to be revisited to situate the current study and the professional practice of pracademics in higher education. Sutherland (2018) has suggested that academic development is a joint enterprise between academic developers and other members of the university community, such as teachers and researchers. Similarly, Leibowitz et al. (2015) described academic development as the creation of conditions that support teaching and learning. However, the seemingly narrow definition and operationalisation of academic development has also been questioned (Le-May Sheffield & Serbati, 2022; Sutherland, 2018). To address the gap associated with the definition and conceptualisation of the term, Le-May Sheffield and Serbati (2022) suggest that academic development should be seen as consisting of a set of multi-faceted identities, processes, and experiences of individuals who are provided with the support they need. The weakness of the suggestion by Le-May Sheffield and Serbati (2022) is that it discounts contextual and geographical features that define academic development as a concept. For instance, Sugrue et al. (2018) have argued that the dominance of literature in the field by articles from the ‘Western’ world, which mostly focus on concepts such as faculty development, educational development, and instructional development in higher education, suggests a relatively blurred scope of the concept of academic development.

Pracademia consists of three main components: pracademic identity, pracademic community, and pracademic engagement (Hollweck et al., 2021). This narrative aligns with Parkinson et al. (2020) who introduced the model for academic community development that consists of three main dialectics that shape how academic development activities may be organised philosophically and practically: community-focused versus individual-focused; alleviating versus transformative dimension; and needs-based versus asset-based. First, concerning community-focused versus individual-focused, the model

for academic community development has been designed to accommodate heterogeneity within the community and to meet the development needs of members. Secondly, the alleviating versus transformative dimension is linked to the structural and cultural elements that shape the motives of members of the professional community. It is important to add that not only do the structural and cultural elements shape the motives of members of a professional community, but these structures and cultural elements can also create barriers to accessing opportunities and resources. Therefore, the transformative dimension suggests that rather than just mitigating against (alleviating) the difficulties caused by these structural and cultural elements, changes to existing structures and cultural elements could lead to greater opportunities for members of the professional community.

Lastly, concerning the needs-based versus asset-based dimension, Parkinson et al. (2020) argue that 'needs-based approaches to community development assume a resource deficit, and seek to identify and subsequently meet a community's needs by accumulating resources' whereas the 'asset-based approaches identify and leverage the tangible and intangible resources (assets) the community already possesses' (p. 197). This narrative further shows the importance of exploring the different academic development approaches in higher education, and how members of the different professional groups such as pracademics could be supported to develop their professional careers and to address issues concerning their needs, expectations, access to opportunity, and common experiences within and outside the university setting.

Professional identity, social networks, and professional community of pracademics

Professional identities are not static; rather, they are fluid and dynamic, constantly developing and tethered to the consistent social and cultural contexts that shape individual daily experiences (Runcieman, 2018). In the context of the academic development of teachers, professional identity aligns with both dialogical perspectives and social constructivist frameworks by explaining how teachers' sense of self is co-constructed through interactions with the institutional world (Runcieman, 2018), and how they understand their professional responsibilities (Chaula, 2024). This is synonymous with the way pracademics develop their professional identity, which includes a collaborative construction shaped by dialogue, accountability, responsibility, reflection, and engagement with the educational world. Beyond merely demonstrating dual roles (Beaton, 2022; Nalbandian, 1994), pracademics also grapple with and construct an alternative identity that encompasses a separate and distinct space and community-pracademia (Hollweck et al., 2021). However, this article advances the conceptualisation of pracademics by examining how identities, interests, distinct spaces, and communities influence their professional development.

Social networks as a concept evolved from the field of relational sociology, which emphasises social ties and interactions as one of the important constituents of society (Dusdal et al., 2021). A social network has been defined as 'a structure composed of a set of actors, some of whose members are connected by a set of one or more relations' (Knoke & Yang, 2008, p. 8). Therefore, as pracademics join social networks, they obtain access to the different resources that are made available to all members (Mishra, 2020).

Further, the shared goals and resources of the group that arise through social networks could be linked to Bourdieu's (1986) conception of social capital, which is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (p. 248). Professional communities are expert communities that count on the unique abilities of members, identify with group strategies, and focus on the vision and procedures that direct the collective action of a group and share knowledge among group members (Nerland & Hasu, 2021). This seems likely because the process of developing a practice involves the creation of a community whose members can acknowledge one another and engage with others as participants and members of the community (Mori et al., 2022). The current study, therefore, examines how pracademics who constitute part of the broad demography of academic staff across different universities in Accra, Ghana, navigate their professional identities, professional development, and professional practice within a professional community that is characterised by common experiences, needs, and access to opportunities and resources.

Methodology

To examine how the academic development needs of pracademics who teach in higher education settings are addressed, especially within community-led environments, this study adopted a dialogical narrative approach (Arvaja, 2016; Runcieman, 2018) by relying on interviews and the express narration of the pracademics. The participants in this study were 14 pracademics who have taught in various universities in the capital city of Ghana, Accra, between 3 and 15 years, and who are members of a community-led group of pracademics. The community-led group has evolved over the years through the initiative of some pracademics. The distribution of participants based on their specialisations is as follows: Supply Chain – 1; Finance – 2; Health and Safety – 1; Project Management – 3; Procurement and Logistics Officer – 2; Renewable Energy – 1; Marketing – 2; Human Resource/Leadership – 1; Business development – 1. Their unique position in the universities as pracademics, their membership in a professional community and network, and their willingness to share their experiences with the researchers served as the reasons for their selection to participate in this study. The sampling techniques used were purposive and snowball sampling.

We first contacted two pracademics who teach at Ghana Communications Technology University to explain the purpose of the study and why they could serve as important sources of information for the study. Thereafter, we requested that they inform their colleagues in their network about the current study and why we were interested in gathering their lived experiences as members of a network of pracademics. Following the consent of a few members of the network to participate in the study, we obtained their email addresses and sent them a formal request to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted between 11 April and 15 June 2023, via Zoom because most of the participants indicated that they could not make time to attend face-to-face interviews. The duration of the interview was between thirty-five and fifty-two minutes. The recorded data were transcribed and then checked with the voice data to ensure that the responses of the participants were captured correctly. Also, the transcripts were given to participants to read and to

confirm that they represented their views. Issues of disclosure and non-disclosure (Shuman, 2015) were addressed through repeated questions and deeper engagement of the participants. The study was guided by the following rules of research ethics: we informed participants about the purpose of the study; we assured the participants that their participation in the study was not compulsory, and that they could withdraw at any time from the study if they felt uncomfortable continuing. We also assured the participants that the data would be kept confidential and in a safe space. A semi-structured interview was used to gather data from the participants. The current study received ethics approval.

Data analysis

The current study adopted thematic analysis, which is one of the four ways of conducting a narrative analysis (Allen, 2018), to examine the experiences of the pracademics. The use of thematic analysis for the current study enabled the researchers to examine the narrative data and employ theoretical freedom and flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researchers read the transcripts thoroughly to ensure that they were written with no language ambiguities. Next, an index of the transcripts was created while the respondent and cross-case memos were developed. The third step involved the development of codes. In the current study, the data were explored for important phrases and sentences from the participants that particularly addressed how the academic development needs of pracademics are met. The fourth step involved collapsing the codes that emerged into categories, while the fifth step involved identifying the themes based on the patterns developed from the codes and categories. Along these lines, the credibility of the research processes, the authenticity of the findings, and how applicable the research methods are to future research were followed to ensure the trustworthiness, reliability, and validity of the findings. Furthermore, the specific processes used to ensure the credibility of the datasets included prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and follow-up questions. To ensure the trustworthiness of the narrative data gathered, three processes were diligently followed. First, the research was carefully designed to ensure consistency throughout the data collection process, data analysis, and discussion of the findings. Secondly, the data were carefully analysed by way of repeated examination of the data to ensure that the voices of participants were accurately captured and analysed. Third, by examining the codes, we were able to capture insights that emerged from the interviews, especially about the identity of pracademics, and how community-led approaches could enhance their academic development.

Findings

This section provides information on the narratives of participants based on three themes: the common interests of pracademics in the professional network; the professional development of pracademics in teaching, research, and engaged scholarship; and the development of the professional identity of pracademics and their responsibilities. The three themes are presented in this section with representative quotations from the participants.

The common interests of pracademics in the professional network

Pracademics who teach various programmes in universities often have common interests that shape their professional practice and development. Participants explained how they develop common experiences as pracademics:

Through our network, we have set up a consultancy team that reviews the curricula of some universities in Ghana, particularly, in the areas of environmental health and safety. We also provide consultancy services to some organisations such as TotalEnergies Ghana, Ghana Oil Company Limited (GOIL PLC), and other oil companies. [P007-Environmental Health and Safety Expert]

Another participant touched on the importance of sharing their industry-related experiences with students in the learning setting:

I do not think that I can talk about common experiences I will be able to share my own experience as a member of a group of adjunct lecturers who teach at various universities. I am very much convinced that the students we teach appreciate the practical work experiences we share when teaching, especially at the master's level. [P012-Marketing Officer]

While the views of P007 suggest that through the network of pracademics, they [members] have been able to create and offer consultancy services to different organisations, the submission by P012 illustrates how at the individual level, pracademics seek the academic advancements of students. Other participants also touched on how they obtain access to opportunities, especially within the network of professionals:

I belong to several professional groups and what we often do is to share our knowledge about current practices in our profession. The benefit I have enjoyed from being part of the group of hybrid professionals is my exposure to emerging theories and how I can connect these theories to practice in the classroom. [P001 – Project Management Professional]

A similar view was shared by another participant: 'We work in different industries and so using the informal network, we exchange ideas and obtain access to the resources of the universities to enhance our work'. [P011– Renewable Energy Expert].

Participants highlighted how their involvement in the professional network is influenced by their needs: 'I joined the network because I needed assistance from some colleagues concerning how they are evaluated and also how they deliver their courses satisfactorily. I do not think that I could succeed in isolation' [P012-Marketing Officer]. Another participant touched on the resource needs of pracademics:

I think that the first would be office space for adjunct lecturers, and this cuts across all the universities I teach. Others include low remuneration, presumably because some of us are yet to obtain our PhDs, a lack of bargaining power, and job insecurity. [P013 – Business Development Manager]

Aside from resource needs, members of the network also support each other during occasions such as naming ceremonies. These occasions tend to create a social bond among members of the network: 'I remember when the wife of a colleague gave birth, we contributed and made donations to the member. We also attended the outdooring of the child' [P002 – Procurement and Logistics Officer]. The narratives of the participants also pointed to the fact that there was no specific source of funding for the group's activities,

even though they indicated that they contribute towards events and activities, when necessary, thereby meeting the social needs of members. Feedback from participants revealed that the involvement of pracademics in the professional network is influenced by their social, resource, and job-related needs. Further, the social needs of members and the provisions made by the network for members, in terms of donations and celebrations, typify how cultural values are preserved by members of the group. Feedback from participants also revealed that the involvement of pracademics in the professional network is influenced by their social, resource, and job-related needs.

The professional development of pracademics in teaching, research, and engaged scholarship

The professional practice of academics in the higher education environment is driven by three main features: teaching, research, and engaged scholarship. First, in relation to teaching, one of the challenges pracademics face is the application of appropriate pedagogical approaches in the teaching and learning environment. Participants touched on the professional development programmes organised by some universities to equip them with pedagogical skills: ‘The Post Graduate Certificate Programme that was organised for academics by GTUC and Coventry University has transformed my teaching approaches and also enabled me to manage my classroom better’. [P009-Management Consultant].

Other participants explained how members of the network overcome the challenges associated with pedagogical approaches through collaboration: ‘I did not have any teaching experience when I was employed by the university. However, my colleagues [network] assisted me with some teaching materials and past questions to serve as a guide’. [P011 – Renewable Energy Expert]. Likewise, P003 indicated that ‘having taught for about 8 years, I have mastered the art and science of teaching. Through our network, we share ideas about good teaching methods and management of the classroom, especially the big classes’ [P003 – Project Management Professional]. In relation to research, a participant shared his experiences:

During one of the meetings with the head of department, we were informed to form research groups to write research proposals for grants and produce scholarly articles. Initially, I had reservations as an adjunct but my other colleagues advised me to take it seriously and now, I am happy to have a few publications to my credit. [P001 – Project Management Professional]

The professional development of pracademics includes their participation in conferences. This was highlighted by a participant:

My colleagues and I had our conference fees paid for by the university, and I think that it was a great opportunity for us. I must say that this opportunity has not come on a silver platter. We [pracademics] had to send a formal request to be sponsored. [P006-Development Finance Expert]

The feedback from P001 and P006 suggests that, when given the opportunity and support, pracademics could also contribute to knowledge by engaging in research activities and participating in conferences to share their research findings and learn from their colleagues. The roles of pracademics in the area of engaged scholarship were

highlighted by participants. For instance, one participant shared his opinion about how members of the network undertake engaged scholarship activities: ‘As a group, we organised some students to train some selected market women on the use of social media to market their products. That activity served as our community development project’ [P003 – Project Management Professional]. The narratives of the participants show how pracademics develop relevant skills in the areas of teaching, research, and engaged scholarship through their networks and with the support of the universities.

The development of the professional identity of pracademics and their responsibilities

The development of the professional identity of pracademics is important to their academic development. Excerpts below reflect the views of a participant concerning how she had developed her professional identity:

My second work as an academic began in 2017. . . I became very passionate about teaching to the point when I enrolled in a PhD programme. Now, I have accepted a new identity, which is to remain a hybrid professional who works in industry and uses the knowledge and skills I acquire to help students at the university [P004 – Marketing Manager/Consultant]

By contrast, another participant noted: ‘I do not think that it has much to do with identity than my ability to teach well in class. Other individuals are appointed to work in more than one organisation, and they do that easily, so the same applies to us’ [P009-Management Consultant]. However, on his part, P007 noted that ‘as professionals in various industries who also serve as lecturers, there are lots of expectations from colleagues and students, and that is what makes the issue of professional identity very important’. He added that, ‘we should be able to measure up to expectations by teaching well and also engaging in some research activities to keep our second stream of income’ [P007-Environmental Health and Safety Expert]. The narratives of the participants reveal how the identity of pracademics as industry experts leads to greater expectations from colleagues and students and how these expectations could be met. However, the submissions of the participants further highlight the differences in how pracademics perceive the effect of identity on their role as hybrid professionals.

The identity of pracademics is also linked to their responsibilities towards the university where they teach, their students, and their network. First, concerning the responsibility of the pracademics to the students they teach, one of the participants explained that, ‘at times, we organise workshops for students in areas such as entrepreneurship and the application of statistical tools to conduct market research. There are also times when we offer students internships in our institutions’ [P012-Marketing Officer]. Likewise, another participant stated: ‘I have a passion for teaching students. When I was contacted by the Dean of the Business School to serve as a part-time lecturer, I readily offered to assist I try to offer students a practical understanding of project management [P003 – Project Management Professional]. Focusing on the responsibility of members to the network, another participant stated: ‘I share some of the free training programmes with my colleagues in the network’ [P004 –Marketing manager/consultant]. The feedback from participants revealed that the responsibility of pracademics towards universities, their colleagues, and

themselves enhances their network as well as their personal and professional development. Again, the findings illustrate how pracademics develop their professional practice through knowledge-sharing activities.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine how 14 pracademics who teach at different universities in Ghana navigate their professional identities, professional development, and professional practice within a professional community that is characterised by common experiences, needs, and access to opportunities and resources. The current study argues that the concept of academic development among pracademics is expansive and transcends: the creation of conditions that support teaching and learning (Leibowitz et al., 2015); the establishment of a joint enterprise between academic developers and other members of the university community (Sutherland, 2018); and the explanation that it represents a set of multi-faceted identities, processes, and experiences of individuals who are provided with the support they need (Le-May Sheffield & Serbati, 2022). The three themes that emerged from the interview data provided rich insights into how pracademics who teach in different universities in Ghana navigate their academic development through community-led approaches. As illustrated by the narratives of the participants, the common experiences of pracademics are mostly community-focused rather than individual-focused, and they are driven by activities such as the provision of consultancy services and integrating industry experiences into teaching and learning environment. Secondly, the needs of pracademics consist of three categories: social, resource, and job-related needs. While social needs are driven by social capital, cultural values, and practices, they are also sustained by the financial contributions of members. The financial contributions by members embody a needs-based approach that seeks to support members of the informal network during events. However, the job-related and resource needs of members are met through negotiations with the leadership of the universities, and through shared information by members of the network. For instance, when pracademics are employed by universities, they often lack the required pedagogical skills to support the development of the knowledge and skills of students. However, through the support of other pracademics in the network and training programmes organised by the universities, the new entrants acquire good pedagogical skills. The newly acquired pedagogical skills by members of the network represent intangible assets that are transformative because they are applied in the teaching and learning setting to enhance the learning experiences of students.

The narratives of participants suggest that the motivation of pracademics to join the informal professional networks centres around issues such as job security, and the likelihood of obtaining assistance from their colleagues to perform their roles as academics. These informal networks create an environment that promotes different forms of social capital (Mishra, 2020), including information on professional development opportunities for members of the groups, social support, sharing ideas concerning research and engaged scholarships, and values. Another way pracademics enhance their academic development is through informal professional networks that are organised to promote the shared interests of members. For example, by lobbying for access to opportunities such as the PGCert programme, members of the network demonstrated how

community-led initiatives could transform their professional experiences and the teaching and learning processes in the university where they obtained the certificate.

Closely linked to the academic development of pracademics are their professional identities and how they discharge their responsibilities as academics, especially by promoting their academic discipline within and outside the university. Whereas the explanation of identity includes issues concerning adaptation, culture, leadership, power, and work boundaries (Hollweck et al., 2021; Runcieman, 2018; Zembylas, 2003), the responsibility of pracademics to their employers, colleagues, and students cannot be discounted. Could possible self-conflict arise while pracademics play dual roles? Although the findings of the current study did not point to possible self-conflict, the submission of some participants, particularly concerning the fact that they struggled to cope with the challenges associated with teaching at the early stages of their academic careers, show how important the concept of identity is to the academic development of pracademics. Indeed, identities are socially constructed and negotiated through social interaction (Ibarra, 1999), hence the need for community-led approaches to the academic development of pracademics. There could also be challenges at the institutional level where pracademics may not be able to access certain opportunities and privileges because of their status as part-time staff.

As revealed by the findings of this study, the responsibility of pracademics in the institutions where they teach could be analysed from three domains: the university, students, and the informal network. These responsibilities are linked to the expectations placed on them as hybrid professionals who are required to have practitioner experiences to be able to engage students to understand the theoretical and practical content of their course (Mosier & Opp, 2020). Through shared experiences and resources by pracademics in the various universities where they teach, and within the informal network, they can develop themselves and obtain the relevant knowledge and skills required for their jobs. Along these lines, members of the informal network could come together to set up businesses that could serve to transform their experiences not only within the university environment but also in other industries. In many cases, the intention of members to join the informal professional network could be transformative and alleviating (Parkinson et al., 2020), in terms of resources as well as knowledge and skill acquisition. Likewise, while the various forms of social capital are supported by economic resources, the mechanisms that define how social capital is accessed and organised also depend on the composition and features of the social networks (Mishra, 2020). Indeed, pracademics could promote various academic disciplines through social networks and collaboration. Such activities could include providing input into the development of curricula at universities, observing the teaching sessions of colleagues and providing them with feedback, organising workshops for students to enhance their knowledge and skills, exchanging teaching materials, and assisting students to develop soft skills through engaged scholarship.

Limitations and future research

The findings of the current study should be interpreted in light of two major limitations. First, the current study gathered data from only one professional community of pracademics and, therefore, could not explore the differences in the aims of diverse professional communities to be able to make comparisons.

Secondly, the concept of pracademics was limited to only individuals who were employed by the university on a part-time basis. This means that other categories of pracademics could not be explored. Future studies could examine how different categories of pracademics advance their academic development through community-led approaches.

Conclusion

The current study examined how a group of pracademics who teach at different universities in Ghana pursue academic development using community-led approaches. The narratives of participants illustrate how the academic development of pracademics is linked to their unique professional identity, the social networks that support their personal and professional growth, and the complex professional community in which they operate (pracademia). The findings further revealed that the common interests of pracademics include their access to opportunities, resources, and needs (social, resource, and job-related issues), and the development of common experiences. This study also established that not only does the professional identity of pracademics lead to greater expectations from colleagues and students, but it is also linked to their academic development. Therefore, as pracademics are connected by a common identity and interests that foregrounds their membership in a professional community, their academic development is transformed through their responsibility towards their universities, their colleagues, and themselves. Similarly, the academic development of pracademics within a community-led environment is enhanced by their ability to promote academic disciplines through social networks and collaboration. This includes how they utilise social networks and social capital to develop relevant skills in the areas of teaching, research, and engaged scholarship. Lastly, the current study has shown that the motivation of pracademics to join the professional network centres on issues associated with job security, obtaining the assistance of colleagues to perform their roles as academics, and negotiating for more opportunities such as training programmes and conferences that will help them to develop their professional practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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