

## Article

# The Professional Identity of Academic Lecturers in Higher Education Post-COVID-19 in Israel

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**Abstract:** Professional identity development in higher education and its implications is a growing interest in the literature. Research indicates that the professional identity of academic lecturers has been unstable and influenced by a variety of personal and contextual factors. With a lack of a clear definition of professional identity in literature, we composed The Professional Identity COVID Scale (PI-COVID) specifically designed to measure lecturers' professional identity in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The items focused on three components: occupational security, academic skills, and combining teaching and research. The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations between lecturers' age, years of seniority, academic rank, and work permanence on the professional identity of academic lecturers post-COVID-19 in Israel. Participants were 95 academic lecturers teaching in universities and colleges. Using self-report questionnaires, participants filled the PI-COVID scale. Results showed that age is negatively and significantly associated with PI-COVID. Moreover, seniority years, academic rank, and work permanence are associated with more COVID-19 challenges. Findings showed that lecturers without work permanence and with lower academic rank reported higher occupational insecurity during the pandemic, which emphasizes the vulnerability of younger lecturers and their need for confidence and stability, especially during a crisis event. Thus, our study contributes to the existing literature by better understanding the post-COVID-19 professional identity of academic lecturers. Implications and limitations for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** professional identity; academic lecturers; higher education; COVID-19; seniority; academic rank; work performance; occupational security



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## 1. Introduction

Professional identity development in higher education and its implications is a growing interest in literature [1–3]. More specifically, research indicates that the professional identity of academic lecturers has been unstable and influenced by a variety of personal and contextual factors [4]. It is mainly driven by two contrasting forces affecting their identity: students' demands and academic demands (i.e., research and administration duties). The challenge for lecturers is to navigate between the two [5]. Studies showed that professional identity is a continuous process in which individuals develop their professional identity throughout their lives, especially in light of the new era and pedagogical innovation [6,7]. However, with the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic institutions around the world were forced to switch to online learning, using alternative teaching methods [8,9]. Researchers consider this phenomenon as emergency remote teaching, which refers to a temporary change of instruction as a result of a crisis situation [10–12]. Thus, this sudden shift created new problems for lecturers to deal with. They have become another communication channel, competing for students' attention, and as with all other communication channels now available, the students tend to multi-task and distract themselves with other activities [13]. Moreover, a recent study conducted on academic staff in the

UK indicated that academic staff members have expressed significant concerns regarding virtual learning and its ability to achieve deep learning among students. It also referred to lecturers' concern that the publication of their class recordings will harm their intellectual property, which in turn may affect their sense of job security [14]. Hence, the goal of the present study is to explore the professional identity of lecturers in academia post-COVID-19 in Israel. By using a new scale specifically designed to measure lecturers' professional identity in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the study aims to understand how lecturers perceive their job demands, academic skills, the challenge of combining teaching and research, their sense of occupational security post-COVID-19, and how those perceptions may vary by age, seniority, academic rank, and work permanence. Our results may add to the theoretical knowledge on academic lecturers' PI specifically during a crisis event and provide practical recommendations for academic institutions and policymakers.

### *1.1. Professional Identity (PI)*

The concept of professional identity in literature is complex and composed of conflicting definitions [4]. Beijgaard et al. [15] clarify that the term identity is a relational phenomenon, which refers to a variety of characteristics. Moreover, they point out that "identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context" [15] (p.108). Adams et al. [6] further assert that PI is a continuous process in which individuals develop their professional identity throughout their lives. A study on teachers' professional identity indicated that, in most studies reviewed, the concept of professional identity was either defined differently or not defined at all [15]. Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., [1] point out that previous definitions of PI were mainly associated with a profession and the workplace thus suggesting that PI only develops in the working environment. However, recent studies focus on the understanding that identity is composed of a variety of factors and characterized by a changing and dynamic nature influenced by life experiences such as social experience, educational context, demographic characteristics, professional image, and experience [1,4,16]. Following the literature suggesting a lack of a clear definition and taking a wider view regarding the components of PI, the current research refers to a variety of factors influencing academic lecturers' professional identity. In particular, we examined lecturers' sense of occupational security, academic skills, and the challenge of combining teaching and research as components of professional identity.

### *1.2. Professional Identity Post-COVID-19*

The coronavirus pandemic abruptly transformed and influenced our lives. Efforts to reduce the spread of the virus have fostered countries to decide on lockdowns and home quarantine affecting individuals' psychological and physical health and causing financial problems in many households [17]. In addition, another drastic change was the transition to home working and learning online. Without much notice, the educational system was expected to adapt to the new situation and shift to online learning and teaching [18,19]. Results of qualitative research showed that emergency remote teaching has numerous technological, pedagogical, and social challenges [10]. Teachers and lecturers needed to deal with technical difficulties (e.g., unstable internet connections, challenges in utilizing ZOOM or TEAMS applications) while rebuilding their entire teaching materials and altering them to online learning [20,21]. Lecturers also struggled for students' attention as with all other communication channels now available (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook) the students tend to multi-task and distract themselves with other activities while learning [13]. Moreover, Kınıkoğlu and Can [22] point out that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified uncertainties and concerns about the future of the academic labor market and working conditions. Hence, as demonstrated in the literature above, professional identity is an ongoing process that is influenced by life experiences [16]. Therefore, we suggest that the COVID-19 crisis profoundly impacted the professional identity of lecturers in academia,

in particular, it influenced their sense of occupational security, challenged their academic skills, and caused difficulties in combining teaching and research.

### 1.3. Lecturers' Age

One of the components that may influence lecturers' professional identity is their age. Younger lecturers may be more prone to feelings of insecurity and doubt than older lecturers. A study on faculty perception toward online education during COVID-19 demonstrated that there was a significant difference in faculty's perception in terms of age, educational attainment, years of teaching, and academic rank, such that older faculty members were in favor of online education more than younger faculty [23]. Another study on teachers' challenges regarding digital literacy after COVID-19 showed that the more experienced the teacher, the higher their level of competence [24]. Along the same lines, Owan et al. [25] examined the preparedness of academic staff in African Universities to adopt internet tools for research sharing based on gender and age differences. Results showed that older lecturers reported a higher rate of preparedness than their younger colleagues to adopt internet tools for research sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, following the literature, we suggest that younger lecturers will face more difficulties and challenges during and after post-COVID-19, which accordingly may affect their PI. Thus, we hypothesized that younger participants will be associated with more COVID-19 challenges.

**H1a.** *Age is associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that younger participants will report higher on the PI-COVID scale.*

### 1.4. Lecturers' Seniority, Academic Rank, and Work Permanence

Professional identity may also be affected by lecturers' years of seniority, their academic rank, and work permanence. These components may have a profound influence on lecturers, especially at an early stage of their career. A study conducted before the coronavirus in Chinese academic institutions found that the tenure-track system increases academic pressure on young academics. Participants reported negative emotions regarding their career such as insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety mainly due to the high expectations regarding publications [26]. Moreover, a study on the relationships between student evaluations of lecturers and faculty members' perceptions showed that lecturers who are at the beginning of their academic life and those who are in lower ranks address the negative aspects of the surveys more than others [27]. Miller, Taylor, and Bedeian [28] point out that tenure-track faculty feel significantly more pressure than their tenured colleagues to publish in peer-reviewed journals. These findings corroborate with other studies referring to the high pressure and insecurity young academics experience [26,29].

Furthermore, a recent study conducted in Israeli academia found a positive influence of academic seniority on scholarly productivity, and that the most productive scholars are mid-career life scientists, pointing out the beneficial factors of seniority years and rank on lecturers' experience and performance [30]. Hence, as the literature demonstrated the association between lecturers' years of seniority, academic rank, and work permanence with higher confidence and accomplishments, it is suggested that the uncertainties of dealing with a life-threatening pandemic such as COVID-19 may increase young lecturers' difficulties and thus affecting their sense of professional identity. Therefore, we hypothesized that participants with fewer years of seniority, lower academic rank, and without work permanence will report more COVID-19 challenges.

**H1b.** *Seniority years are associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants with fewer years of seniority will report higher on the PI-COVID scale.*

**H1c.** *Academic rank is associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants with lower academic rank will report higher on the PI-COVID scale.*

**H1d.** *Work permanence is associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants without work permanence will report higher on the PI-COVID scale.*

### 1.5. Occupational Security

Having a sense of occupational security is greatly significant for employees in the workforce [31]. The research defines job security as employees' perceptions regarding the stability and permanence of their job [32]. Studies demonstrated a positive correlation between negative workplace outcomes and job insecurity such as low job satisfaction, low psycho-social wellbeing, and organizational withdrawal [33]. These outcomes have recently increased due to the COVID-19 global crisis, resulting in diverse economic pressures, instability, and occupational insecurity both for organizations and employees [34].

Studies refer to different aspects of security in academia. Bothma and Rossouw [35] explain that professional security in higher education consists of three main factors: The first is environmental security, influenced by a general sense of job security, institutional and collegial support, and possessing applicable resources. The second is psychological security, affected by lecturers' feelings of respect and recognition, and the prospects for personal and professional growth. The third is having a sense of legal security, protection, and fairness in administrative matters.

Nir and Zilberstein-Levy [36] point out the implications of role stress derived from occupational insecurity as influencing the professional choices of pre-tenured faculty. Moreover, they clarify that the sense of security of having work permanence is an essential aspect of academia, and acts as an incentive for faculty members' motivation and academic development. A recent review examining the causes of occupational stress among Australian and New Zealand academics suggest that job insecurity and an unstable work environment are part of the environmental factors that can cause occupational stress [37]. Similarly, Miller, Rutherford, and Kolodinsky [38] point out that concern for employment security (among other factors) is associated with high levels of stress in teaching in higher education.

Another component that may influence academics' occupational security is rank. A study on the impact of rank on organizational commitment of faculty members showed that overall organizational commitment increases progressively with rank, and that rank does not have a positive influence on affective, continuance, and normative commitment. These findings indicate that the faculty in higher positions are generally more committed to their organization than their lower-ranking colleagues [39]. Hence, we hypothesized that participants without work permanence and lower academic ranks will report higher occupational insecurity.

**H2a.** *Participants without work permanence will report higher occupational insecurity.*

**H2b.** *Participants with lower academic ranks will report more occupational insecurity than those with higher academic ranks.*

In summary, the purpose of the present study was to examine the association between lecturers' age, years of seniority, academic rank, and work permanence on the professional identity of academic lecturers post-COVID-19 in Israel.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The study hypotheses were tested on 95 subjects using self-report questionnaires. Subjects were Israeli academic lecturers teaching in universities and colleges. The primary difference between a university and a college in Israel is that only a university can grant doctorate degrees, and therefore tend to be more research-oriented than the more teaching-oriented colleges, however, both institutions are recognized and academically supervised by the Council for Higher Education in Israel. The sample consisted of 33 men (34.7%) and 62 women (65.3%). Participants ranged in age from 37 to 84 years with a mean age of 52.36% (SD = 9.9). Seniority ranged from 3 to 45 years in academia, and 49 lecturers (54.4%) reported having a work permanence. A total of 62 lecturers (72.1%) had a senior rank (doctors or professors) and 47 (49.5%) taught only in universities compared with 39 (41.1%) who taught only in colleges.

## 2.2. Measures

The Professional Identity COVID Scale (PI-COVID) is composed of 10 items ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”, reflecting the degree to which an individual evaluates his/her professional identity post-COVID-19. The scale was specifically designed to measure lecturers’ professional identity in relation to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the items focused on three components: occupational security, academic skills, and combining teaching and research. An item for example is: “The Corona period made me feel occupational insecurity” (see Appendix A). A pretest conducted among 27 lecturers yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.75 for the whole scale. In addition, the occupational insecurity component (4 items) was supported as the pretest reliability was 0.86.

## 2.3. Procedure

IRB approval was obtained, and all ethical procedures were observed by the Ethics Committee of the University. Participants signed a consent form before completing the questionnaires and were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and that participation was voluntary. The study was promoted among lecturers teaching in universities and colleges on email and social media (WhatsApp groups) using a snowball approach. The online data were collected using Google Forms between May and July 2021 after the end of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel. At this point, the government removed most of the restrictions and opened the educational system, workplaces, and shopping centers.

## 2.4. Analyses

Data were analyzed quantitatively using IBM SPSS statistics 26. Cronbach’s reliability of the PI-COVID scale was 0.75, and the occupational security component’s reliability was 0.76. Given the number of items and the complexity of the concept, these reliabilities are considered adequate. Since the independent factors were inserted as free text, a qualitative analysis was performed to classify the information into the measured variables. As such, the variable seniority years was classified into three categories representing low seniority (3–11 years), medium seniority (12–19 years), and high seniority (20 years and above). In addition, the variable academic rank was classified into two categories representing low rank (lecturers with M.A. degree or equivalent, as well as doctoral students) and high rank (lecturers with Ph.D. degrees and above). Harman’s single-factor test for examining common method bias was applied to the item scales in the study. It was clear that one factor explained only a small amount of common variance (33%).

## 3. Results

The means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas, and zero-order correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1, and the differences in PI-COVID by seniority years, work permanence, and academic rank are shown in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas, and zero-order correlations among study variables.

		Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	PI-COVID	2.08	0.66	95	(0.75)					
2.	Occupational insecurity	1.91	0.94	95	0.83 **	(0.76)				
3.	Age	52.36	9.9	87	−0.31 **	−0.25 *	-			



**Table 1.** *Cont.*

		Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
4.	Seniority years	-	-	93	−0.18	−0.15	−0.66 **	-		
5.	Work permanence	-	-	90	−0.34 **	−0.47 **	0.28 **	0.33 **	-	
6.	Academic rank	-	-	86	−0.32 **	−0.27 *	0.21	0.28 **	0.28 *	-

Note. Coefficient alphas in brackets. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 2.** One-way analyses of PI-COVID differences by seniority years, work permanence, and academic rank.

	Level	N (Valid%)	PI-COVID Mean (SD)	F	Sig.
Seniority years	low	32 (34.4%)	2.33 (0.72)	$F_{(2,90)} = 4.16$	$p = 0.019$
	medium	30 (32.3%)	1.87 (0.52)		
	high	31 (33.3%)	2.04 (0.64)		
Academic rank	low	24 (27.9%)	2.40 (0.70)	$F_{(1,84)} = 9.49$	$p = 0.003$
	high	62 (72.1%)	1.95 (0.59)		
Work permanence	no	41 (45.6%)	2.33 (0.75)	$F_{(1,88)} = 11.49$	$p = 0.001$
	yes	49 (54.4%)	1.88 (0.50)		

Hypothesis H1a stipulates that age is associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that younger participants will report higher on the PI-COVID scale. A Pearson correlation analysis shows that age is negatively and significantly associated with PI-COVID ( $r = -0.31$ ,  $N = 87$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that younger lectures experience more challenges associated with COVID-19 compared with their older colleagues (see Table 1). As such, hypothesis H1a is supported.

Hypothesis H1b argues that seniority years are associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants with fewer years of seniority will report higher on the PI-COVID scale. Findings show a significant effect of seniority years on PI-COVID scores ( $F_{(2,90)} = 4.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (see Table 2). Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test indicate that the PI-COVID mean score of the least senior group ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) is significantly higher than the mean score of the medium seniority group ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ). However, the PI-COVID mean score of the high seniority group ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) does not differ significantly from either of the other two groups. Thus, hypothesis H1B is partially supported.

The third hypothesis (H1c) contends that academic rank is associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants with lower academic rank will report higher on the PI-COVID scale. One-way ANOVA analysis reveals a significant effect for academic rank ( $F_{(1,84)} = 9.49$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) such that the PI-COVID mean score for low rank lecturers ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) is greater from that of the higher rank lecturers ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) (see Table 2). Thus, hypothesis H1c is also supported.

Hypothesis H1d argues that work permanence is associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants without work permanence will report higher on the PI-COVID scale. Findings show a significant effect for work permanence ( $F_{(1,88)} = 11.49$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) such that lecturers without work permanence score higher on the PI-COVID scale ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) compared to lecturers with work permanence ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ), supporting hypothesis H1d (see Table 2).

As for hypotheses H2a and H2b concerning the effect of work permanence and academic rank on the PI-COVID component of occupational insecurity, findings show a significant effect for work permanence on occupational insecurity ( $F_{(1,88)} = 24.43, p < 0.001$ ) such that lecturers without work permanence reported higher occupational insecurity ( $M = 2.41, SD = 1.07$ ) compared to lecturers with work permanence ( $M = 1.52, SD = 0.61$ ). In addition, a significant effect was found for academic rank ( $F_{(1,84)} = 6.83, p < 0.05$ ) such that lecturers with lower academic rank reported higher occupational insecurity ( $M = 2.28, SD = 0.95$ ) compared to lecturers with higher academic rank ( $M = 1.72, SD = 0.88$ ) (see Table 3). Therefore, hypotheses H2a and H2b were both supported.

**Table 3.** One-way analyses of differences in occupational insecurity by work permanence and academic rank.

	Description	N (Valid%)	Occupational Insecurity Mean (SD)	F	Sig.
Work permanence	no	41 (45.6%)	2.41 (1.07)	$F_{(1,88)} = 24.43$	$p = 0.000$
	yes	49 (54.4%)	1.52 (0.61)		
Academic rank	low	24 (27.9%)	2.28 (0.95)	$F_{(1,84)} = 6.83$	$p = 0.011$
	high	62 (72.1%)	1.72 (0.88)		

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the associations between lecturers' age, years of seniority, academic rank, and work permanence on the professional identity of academic lecturers post-COVID-19. As hypothesized, the findings presented here showed that age is negatively and significantly associated with PI-COVID, thus indicating that younger lectures experienced more challenges associated with COVID-19 compared with their older colleagues. This finding is consistent with other studies showing that younger teachers report more stress due to career change, familial status, and overall workload [40].

More findings revealed that seniority years are associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants with fewer years of seniority reported higher on the PI-COVID scale compared with the medium seniority group. In addition, although not statistically significant, the direction of results indicated that the PI-COVID mean score of the high seniority group is somewhat higher than the mean score of the medium seniority group but lower than the mean score of the least senior group. These findings suggest that the medium seniority group might be more open to experiences, and thus feel more confident to face challenges. In contrast, lecturers with fewer years of seniority might feel insecure and therefore experience difficulties when dealing with a crisis [25]. Likewise, the high seniority group might struggle with changes as they are relatively less tech-savvy and tend to be more fixated on traditional methods and habits [41].

Results also showed that academic rank and work permanence are associated with more COVID-19 challenges, such that participants with lower academic rank and without work permanence reported higher on the PI-COVID scale. Our findings support recent literature pointing to the beneficial factors of rank on lecturers' experience and performance [27,30]. In addition, our results corroborate with other studies referring to the high pressure and insecurity that young academics, without work permanence experience in academia [26,28,29].

Further results showed that lecturers without work permanence reported higher occupational insecurity compared to lecturers with work permanence. In addition, lecturers with lower academic rank reported higher occupational insecurity compared to lecturers with higher academic rank. These findings demonstrate the vulnerability of younger lecturers who do not possess work permanence or higher ranks and their need for confidence. Kinman and Court's [42] study claimed that to experience security in their working environment, lecturers need support, encouragement, and respect, especially from

university management and their peers. They assert that such actions may enhance levels of psychological wellbeing, commitment to job performance, and job satisfaction.

### *Limitations*

This research has several limitations that should be noted. The first is the study's measures which were limited to lecturers' self-report questionnaires. We suggest that to enhance the reliability of the study mixed-method research that combines quantitative and qualitative components such as semi-structured interviews with academic lectures may provide broader and more accurate results. It should also be noted that the study was conducted in Israeli academic institutions which provides a specific point of view and therefore it is recommended to conduct it in other countries as well to receive a wider understanding of lecturers' PI. Moreover, data were collected in May 2021 after the end of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the government removed most of the restrictions and opened the educational system and workplaces. As such, perhaps we would have received different results if given at a different time. Thus, for further research, it is recommended to do a longitudinal study to examine the professional identity of lecturers at several time points. Another suggestion for further research may include other variables such as psychological components of wellbeing and mental health as predictors of lecturers' professional identity post-COVID-19.

### **5. Conclusions**

As countries around the world are still dealing with long-COVID effects and different variants, our results emphasize that academic institutions, educational administration, and policymakers should take into consideration the implications of emergency remote teaching during the pandemic, in which younger lecturers with lower academic ranks may be more vulnerable to crises and experience obstacles and feelings of occupational insecurity thus leading to dropout. Therefore, to enhance lecturers' professional identity in higher education it is recommended that academic institutions provide lecturers and especially those with lower academic ranks, with support groups and workshops of technological and emotional guidance to better cope with events of crises.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Appendix A**

The Professional Identity COVID Scale (PI-COVID)  
Occupational security

1. The Corona period made me rethink my professional future
2. The Corona period made me feel occupational insecurity
3. The Corona period made me feel insecure about my work as a lecturer
4. I feel confident regarding my occupational future in academia

Academic skills

5. I often doubt whether I fit the academic work



6. I know what to do and how to do my academic work
  7. I think I have the required skills to be a good academician
- Combining teaching and research
8. The Corona period caused me difficulties in finding the time to combine teaching and research
  9. The Corona period allowed me to dedicate valuable time to doing research
  10. I feel satisfied with my ability to combine the academic requirements of research, publication, and teaching

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