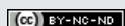




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REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF RESEARCHER IDENTITY IN VOCATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This empirical study with methodological reflection examines how postgraduate research education shaped six lecturers' researcher, academic, and professional identities within a Vocational and Professional Higher Education and Training (VPET) institution whose provision extends through Level 8. It also examines what the study demonstrates about conducting Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as a practitioner-researcher in an institutionally bounded setting. Six purposively selected lecturers participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The dataset was analysed through Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach, with MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software) supporting transcript organisation, coding, memoing, retrieval, comparison of coded segments, and iterative review of developing themes. The analysis generated four interpretive themes: research engagement as identity transformation; conditions that enable researcher-becoming; ambivalence, workload and constraint; and research culture as relational infrastructure. Participants described growing methodological confidence, stronger identification as researchers, and greater capacity to support students, while also negotiating time, workload, competing responsibilities, and uneven structural support. Methodologically, the study demonstrates that RTA requires explicit attention to researcher positionality, relational ethics, deductive identifiability, and the distinction between software-supported data management and interpretive theme generation. A worked analytic pathway makes the movement from participant excerpts to codes, and final themes visible without treating themes as emergent rather than generated. The methodological reflection further explains why sample adequacy is better reasoned through information power and analytic depth than through saturation claims in this form of thematic analysis. The article concludes with transferable guidance for practitioner-researchers conducting reflexive, ethically attentive RTA in vocational higher education and similarly bounded professional settings.

Keywords

Practitioner-inquiry; Insider positionality; Methodological reflection; Academic identity; Scholarly belonging; Deductive disclosure.

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1. Introduction

Research engagement can alter how lecturers understand themselves as professionals, academics, and knowledge producers. This question is particularly significant in vocational and professional higher education and training (VPET), where occupational expertise, teaching, applied inquiry, and increasingly formal research expectations intersect. The institution in which this study was conducted is a vocational higher education provider with provision extending through Level 8; the setting is therefore defined by its vocational mission and higher education remit rather than solely by institutional size. The present study examines lecturers who undertook postgraduate research education and asks how that engagement shaped researcher identity and research-related practice. Programme evaluation and professional development are treated as contextual dimensions; the central analytic focus is identity formation through engagement with research.

The article has a second, equally important purpose: to make the qualitative methodology visible. Rather than presenting RTA as a neutral sequence of coding steps, the study treats analysis as an interpretive practice in which the researcher actively generates meaning through sustained engagement with participants' accounts. This is especially consequential in an institutionally bound setting where the researcher is also a practitioner and where professional proximity can affect participant recruitment, disclosure, interpretation, anonymity, and the ethical representation of critique. Accordingly, the article is positioned as an Empirical Study with Methodological Reflection and uses empirical analysis as a worked example of reflexive, situated qualitative inquiry.

The underpinning research question is: How did engagement in postgraduate research education shape lecturers' researcher, academic, and professional identities and their research-related practice?

2. Background and Conceptual Context

2.1 Research Engagement and Academic Identity

Academic identity is not fixed; it is negotiated through practice, recognition, participation, expertise, and changing institutional expectations. Research on academics' conceptions of research shows that engagement with inquiry is bound up with how academics understand knowledge production, teaching, professional legitimacy, and their place within scholarly communities (Åkerlind, 2008; Kiley & Mullins, 2005; Prosser et al., 2008). These relationships are especially important in vocational higher education, where academic identity may be gathered from several sources of credibility at once: occupational expertise, pedagogical practice, industry relevance, formal qualification, and research activity.

Rather than assuming that a researcher identity simply replaces a practitioner or lecturer identity, the literature suggests that professional identities can coexist, overlap, and sometimes compete. This makes identity formation a useful lens for examining what happens when vocational lecturers move more deeply into postgraduate research education.

Work focused specifically on higher education delivered in vocational settings strengthens this argument. Sinclair and Webb (2020) found that educators in vocational institutions constructed academic identities through claims of distinctiveness from universities, and that some resisted research centred definitions of academic legitimacy. Earlier work on higher education in further education similarly identified uncertainty around the meaning of being an academic and the difficulty of reconciling established professional identities with conventional academic expectations (Feather, 2010). In Malta, Said (2022) demonstrated that vocational teacher educators' role identities are shaped by the vocational context and differ from those of mainstream educators. Taken together, these studies indicate that researcher-becoming occurs within an already established professional identity ecology. The present study extends this literature by examining how postgraduate research education can become a mechanism through which a researcher identity is developed, negotiated, and integrated with vocational and pedagogical identities.

2.2 Learning Research through Participation

Research methods education can support ownership when learners connect methodological choices to questions arising from their own fields. Earlier work on research methods teaching emphasises learning by doing, relevance to the learner's project, and student-centred support (Benson & Blackman, 2003; Booth & Harrington, 2003; Edwards & Thatcher, 2004; Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2003; Winn, 1995). Such pedagogies matter for identity because research competence is not acquired only as technical knowledge; it is enacted through making methodological decisions, defending choices, interpreting evidence, and participating in research conversations. For VPET lecturers, this process occurs alongside lecturing and professional responsibilities, so flexibility, scaffolding, accessible methodological dialogue, and opportunities to connect research with practice can affect whether research is experienced as an external academic requirement or as part of a credible professional self. In the present study, these pedagogical conditions provide context for the identity processes analysed below rather than serving as an institutional programme evaluation.

2.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis as an Interpretive Approach

RTA is one form of thematic analysis and should not be conflated with codebook approaches or approaches that seek agreement between multiple researchers.

In reflexive TA, themes are analytic outputs generated through the researcher's theoretically informed engagement with data; researcher subjectivity is a resource to be examined reflexively rather than a contaminant to be eliminated. Braun and Clarke (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022, 2023) emphasise conceptual coherence, reflexive engagement, and fit between research questions, philosophical assumptions, analytic practice, and claims. Their work also cautions against importing procedures associated with other forms of thematic analysis, such as procedures that seek agreement between multiple researchers, or saturation claims, when these conflict with an interpretive reflexive design. This orientation is consistent with the present study's relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, in which knowledge is treated as situated and interpretation as co-constituted rather than discovered as a singular objective account. It is particularly appropriate for identity research because participants' accounts are not treated as transparent reports of a fixed inner identity; instead, meaning is generated through attention to how identities are described, negotiated, valued, and constrained within a particular professional context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Positioning and Design

The study adopted a qualitative design informed by a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reality was approached as multiple and situated, while knowledge was understood as produced through interaction among participants, researcher, context, and interpretive practice. In-depth interviewing and RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) were therefore selected because they enabled attention to meaning, experience, contradiction, and the researcher's active interpretive role.

3.2 Participants and Purposive Sampling

Six lecturers with direct experience of postgraduate research education were purposively selected. Eligibility entailed current or completed participation in postgraduate research methods or doctoral level research study and experience as a lecturer in vocational higher education. The sample was deliberately information rich rather than intended to represent a population statistically. Six interviews were considered appropriate because the research questions were focused, participants shared a specific experiential domain, interviews generated substantial depth, and the analytic aim was intensive interpretive engagement with a small sample. This reasoning is consistent with the concept of information power, whereby a focused aim, a specific sample, strong interview dialogue, and an intensive analytic strategy can justify a smaller qualitative sample (Malterud et al., 2016). Consistent with RTA, sample adequacy was not justified through claims of data saturation; the rationale rested on specificity, depth, and the capacity of the dataset to support a coherent, nuanced analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

3.3 Data Generation

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews explored motivations for undertaking research study, experiences of research education, supportive and hindering conditions, perceived changes in professional and researcher identity, research confidence, future trajectories, publication, and the influence of research learning on work with students. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, digitally recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. The interview guide provided consistency while allowing follow-up questions and elaboration.

3.4 Practitioner-Researcher Position, Relational Ethics, and Anonymity

The researcher occupied a practitioner-researcher position as a senior lecturer, researcher, and coordinator connected to the educational context under study. This proximity created both interpretive resources and ethical risks. Familiarity supported contextual understanding and enabled informed probing, but it also created the possibility that participants could anticipate the researcher's views, soften criticism, emphasise accounts perceived as professionally acceptable, or experience participation as less detached from professional relationships than it would be with an external interviewer. The analysis therefore treated proximity as an influence to be examined rather than a claim to privileged access.

Methodologically, practitioner-researcher proximity is not treated here as a binary insider/outsider status but as a shifting relation that changes across recruitment, interviewing, interpretation, and representation. The practical advantage of contextual familiarity was therefore held alongside the risk of over-familiarity: shared institutional language could make an account seem self-evident when it required further probing, while knowledge of local roles could invite interpretations not warranted by the transcript alone. Reflexive practice consequently involved asking what I was assuming because of institutional knowledge, what a participant had actually articulated, and how my professional location might shape both the question asked and the meaning attributed to the answer. This moves positionality from a biographical declaration to an analytic practice and makes reflexivity part of methodological accountability rather than an after-the-event statement.

Procedural, situational, and relational ethics informed the study (Tracy, 2010). Participants received study information and provided written consent; recordings were deleted after transcription, and pseudonyms were used. For the revised reporting, institutional and programme-specific identifiers have been generalised, and excerpts containing potentially identifying organisational details have been removed, shortened, or reported at a higher level of abstraction. This is particularly important in a six-participant study where combinations of role, programme level, career trajectory, and quoted organisational experience could enable deductive identification even when names are absent.

Relational ethics also extended beyond formal consent. In a bounded professional setting, ethical responsibility continues through quotation selection, contextual description, and publication because combinations of role, experience, and organisational detail may render a participant recognisable to colleagues. Decisions about what to report therefore balanced evidential richness against deductive identifiability. Where a vivid detail added little to the analytic claim but increased identification risk, it was generalised or omitted; where an excerpt was analytically important, surrounding details were minimised. This illustrates a transferable tension for insider qualitative research: transparency should make the interpretive process visible without making participants visible in ways they did not consent to.

Potential participant response influence was addressed through open questions that invited positive, negative, and mixed experiences; probing for hindrances and disagreement; and analytic attention to dissonant accounts rather than treating positive experiences as the default narrative. Reflexive memoing was used to record moments when the researcher's prior knowledge, expectations, institutional familiarity, or emotional response appeared likely to shape interpretation. These practices do not remove relational influence; they make it more visible and accountable.

3.5 Operationalising Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six recursive phases, understood as a flexible analytic practice rather than a linear protocol. First, familiarisation involved repeated reading of transcripts and the recording of early observations about identity, confidence, support, constraint, and tensions in participants' accounts. Second, coding was conducted across the dataset, with attention to both semantic content and more interpretive meanings. Codes were treated as provisional analytic tools rather than fixed variables. Third, related codes were brought into provisional clusters and candidate themes that addressed the research question. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the wider dataset, with boundaries revised where themes were too broad, overlapping, or merely topical. Fifth, themes were refined and named to express an organising concept rather than a topic heading. Sixth, writing became part of analysis: excerpts, interpretive commentary, theme boundaries, and relationships among themes were repeatedly reconsidered as the account was developed.

MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) supported data management rather than generating the analysis. It was used to store and organise transcripts, attach and revise codes, retrieve coded segments across participants, compare differently coded extracts, write analytic memos and reflexive observations, and revisit the distribution, boundaries, and alignment of candidate themes generated. The software made the developing analytic record easier to navigate, but decisions about what counted as meaningful, how codes related, and what organising concept constituted a theme remained interpretive decisions made by the researcher.

The use of qualitative software also required methodological reflexivity. Digital coding environments can make retrieval, comparison, memoing, and the documentation of analytic revisions more systematic, but their interface can also encourage researchers to treat codes as stable containers or to equate visible code structures with analysis. In this study, MAXQDA was therefore used as an organisational and traceability environment rather than as an epistemic authority. Code labels and candidate theme structures were repeatedly revised outside any assumption that software architecture represented the conceptual structure of participants' accounts. This distinction is important for RTA because analytic quality rests on the researcher's interpretive engagement and theoretical coherence, not on the quantity of codes, frequency counts, or the apparent procedural order supplied by software.

3.6 Making the Analytic Pathway Visible

Table 1 retrospectively maps representative excerpts reported in the study to concise interpretive codes, candidate thematic ideas, and the final thematic structure. It is presented as a transparency device rather than as evidence that analysis proceeded mechanically from one extract to one code to one theme. In RTA, codes and themes were revised recursively as the researcher moved between extracts, the whole dataset, reflexive notes, and the developing argument.

Table 1. Representative Analytic Pathway from Excerpts to Final Themes

Representative excerpt	Interpretive code	Candidate thematic idea	Final theme
"I finally feel like I have something for myself... fulfilled, satisfied and well achieved" (Participant E).	Research study as self-validation	Becoming more confident through research	Research engagement as identity transformation
"I feel that I know more what I'm doing... how I can guide my students" (Participant D).	Confidence travels into supervision	Research learning reshapes teaching practice	Research engagement as identity transformation
"Having three different tutors helped... giving different perspectives" (Participant C).	Methodological plurality supports positioning	Learning through dialogue and choice	Conditions that enable researcher-becoming
"At the beginning... switching between methodologies seemed confusing" (reported account).	Methodological breadth can initially unsettle	Productive difficulty in research learning	Ambivalence, workload, and constraint
"I had a lot of additional duties. I had to make choices and let go of some other things" (Participant D).	Research competes with professional workload	Identity development is resource dependent	Ambivalence, workload, and constraint
"More community of practice... The sense of belonging increases" (Participant E).	Research identity strengthened through scholarly belonging	Belonging sustains researcher identity	Research culture as relational infrastructure

3.7 Quality and Reflexive Accountability

Quality was approached through methodological coherence, rich engagement with data, transparency of analytic decisions, reflexivity, ethical attentiveness, and the persuasive relationship among excerpts, interpretations, and claims. Tracy's (2010) criteria and Guba and Lincoln's quality concepts provided sensitising resources, but quality was not reduced to a checklist. For RTA specifically, coherence between the stated reflexive approach and the actual analytic practice was treated as central: themes were not described as emergent, saturation was not used as a universal endpoint, and themes were actively generated through the researcher's reflexive, interpretive, and theoretically informed engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022, 2023).

4. Findings

Four themes were generated: (1) research engagement as identity transformation; (2) conditions that enable researcher-becoming; (3) ambivalence, workload, and constraint; and (4) research culture as relational infrastructure. The themes are interpretive patterns that organise participants' accounts around the central question of researcher identity. Positive and difficult experiences are analysed together to avoid presenting identity development as uniformly progressive. Table 2 depicts the generated themes, their respective interpretive meaning and participant evidence.

Table 2. Generated Themes, Interpretive Meaning, and Illustrative Participant Evidence

Generated Theme	Interpretive Meaning	Illustrative Participant Excerpt
1. Research engagement as identity transformation	Research engagement was experienced, as more than the acquisition of methodological knowledge. Participants described changes in confidence, self-perception, professional agency, and their understanding of themselves as academics and researchers. Researcher identity developed alongside, rather than separately from, their established lecturer identity.	<i>"It helped me to believe more in myself, to believe in my capabilities and to become stronger as a person."</i> (Participant D)
2. Conditions that enable researcher-becoming	Becoming a researcher was facilitated by structured learning, methodological exposure, supportive relationships, research ownership, and the freedom to pursue professionally meaningful topics. Together, these conditions supported the progressive development of confidence, autonomy, and agency as a researcher.	<i>"I felt I will have more freedom to research something that I truly enjoy and makes sense in my professional journey."</i> (Participant E)
3. Ambivalence, workload, and constraint	Researcher identity formation was neither linear nor uniformly positive. Participants negotiated research alongside teaching responsibilities, workload, personal commitments, and limited time. These tensions indicate that researcher-becoming is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the conditions within which sustained research engagement is possible.	<i>"Research in itself is very exacting in nature."</i> (Participant D)
4. Research culture as relational infrastructure	Research culture emerged through relationships, scholarly dialogue, professional recognition, collaboration, and a shared sense of belonging. Participants' accounts indicate that researcher identity is strengthened when research is experienced as a collective academic practice rather than solely as an individual endeavour.	<i>"The sense of belonging increases."</i> (Participant E)

4.1 Theme 1: Research Engagement as Identity Transformation

Participants described research education as changing not only what they knew but how they understood themselves. Methodological knowledge, completion of demanding study, publication activity, and greater confidence in evaluating research contributed to a stronger sense of legitimacy as academics and researchers. Participant C linked formal study to self-confidence, while Participant E described a sense of fulfilment and achievement. Participant B similarly explained that the course enriched professional knowledge and strengthened a research background.

“I finally feel like I have something for myself. This is something that helps me to feel fulfilled, satisfied and well achieved.” (Participant E)

The interpretive significance of these accounts lies in identity authorisation: research study became evidence participants could use to recognise themselves as capable knowledge producers. This was not simply credential acquisition. Participants described altered ways of reading, questioning, discussing evidence, and approaching academic work. Participant C, for example, described looking more critically at sources and at how research was written.

Identity change also travelled into participants’ teaching and supervision. Research learning was described as increasing confidence in guiding dissertations, opening more dialogic approaches to teaching, and making research practice more visible to students.

“I feel that I know more what I’m doing. I believe more in myself and how I can guide my students.” (Participant D)

“What I’m learning from my research here is helping me with my lectures as well. So, I am transferring that knowledge into what I teach my students.” (Participant A)

These accounts suggest that researcher identity was relational rather than purely personal: participants experienced becoming a researcher partly through what they could now offer students and colleagues. Professional development and pedagogical change therefore support, but do not replace, the central analytic focus on identity formation.

4.2 Theme 2: Conditions That Enable Researcher-Becoming

Participants’ accounts show that identity development was enabled by pedagogical conditions that made research feel navigable. Exposure to different methodologies, staged assignments, access to discussion, and support from multiple tutors were described as helping participants move from uncertainty toward greater methodological agency.

Participant C valued encountering different perspectives because this enabled an eventual choice of personal positioning, while Participant D described the research process as more manageable when broken into smaller milestones.

“Having different tutors helped as they position themselves differently, giving different perspectives and you can then finally choose your own positioning in research.” (Participant C)

“Sometimes I look at the whole process as a big thing, but when you break it down into small achievable steps, I feel calmer, and I feel that I can do it.” (Participant D)

The key interpretive point is not that one programme design is universally effective, but that researcher identity was supported when participants could exercise ownership while receiving enough structure to make complex research work intelligible. Freedom to select personally and professionally meaningful research areas further strengthened this ownership. Participant A described choosing an area already known and valued, and Participant E linked topic choice to a professional journey.

Support was therefore experienced less as simple assistance and more as a condition for agency. Dialogic teaching, methodological plurality, and topic ownership allowed participants to position themselves rather than merely follow a prescribed method. This distinction matters methodologically because it explains why apparently descriptive comments about course structure became analytically relevant to identity formation.

4.3 Theme 3: Ambivalence, Workload, and Constraint

Becoming a researcher was not uniformly positive. Participants also described confusion, intensity, competing commitments, limited time, and tensions between research aspirations and professional workload. One participant initially found movement among methodologies confusing, although later reflection and additional reading helped the material cohere. Participants studying alongside employment and family responsibilities described the work as exacting and time intensive.

“I had a lot of additional duties. I had to make choices and let go of some other things to continue the courses effectively.” (Participant D)

These accounts complicate a simple transformation narrative. Confidence and ambition could increase at the same time as fatigue, constraint, or uncertainty. Some participants described organisational arrangements around time and workload as sometimes insufficiently responsive to the demands of research. The underlying pattern remains important: research identity required material and temporal conditions, not motivation alone.

Dissonant data also included resistance to research initiatives, difficulties progressing collaborative publication, and uncertainty about aspects of supervision or methodological breadth. These accounts influenced theme development by preventing supportive conditions and positive outcomes from being treated as the whole story. The final theme therefore holds aspiration and constraint together: participants could value research deeply while simultaneously experiencing the conditions for sustaining it as uneven.

4.4 Theme 4: Research Culture as Relational Infrastructure

Participants located their developing researcher identities within a wider research culture. Opportunities to publish, participate in scholarly events, exchange ideas, and belong to communities of practice were described as legitimising research activity and helping lecturers see research as part of professional life. Participant E explicitly connected networking with a stronger sense of belonging.

“More community of practice to meet other researchers is very important and also networking events... The sense of belonging increases.” (Participant E)

Research culture is interpreted here as relational infrastructure: a set of interactions, opportunities, expectations, and recognitions through which researcher identity can be sustained. This interpretation avoids equating culture with institutional strategy or with a uniformly positive organisational account. Participants’ mixed experiences indicate that culture is negotiated and can include both encouragement and friction. The methodological value of retaining such ambivalence is that it prevents a practitioner-researcher from converting participants’ accounts into institutional advocacy.

5. Discussion

The analysis indicates that postgraduate research engagement functioned as identity work. Participants described a movement toward greater confidence, methodological agency, scholarly belonging, and capacity to support students. These findings align with literature that treats academic identity as shaped through participation, recognition, practice, and changing conceptions of research (Åkerlind, 2008; Kiley & Mullins, 2005; Prosser et al., 2008). In vocational higher education, this process is especially significant because lecturers may negotiate identities as practitioners, teachers, researchers, and supervisors simultaneously.

The study also shows why identity formation should not be collapsed into programme satisfaction. Participants could value their research education while also reporting confusion, workload pressure, constrained time, or uneven support. These tensions were analytically productive. They indicate that researcher identity is not simply acquired through a qualification; it is sustained through material conditions, relational recognition, opportunities for scholarly participation, and the ability to integrate research with other professional and personal commitments.

For qualitative methodology, the study demonstrates the importance of distinguishing topic summaries from themes. Earlier descriptive categories such as positive aspects, supportive aspects, professional impact, and hindrances were useful during analysis but risked functioning as inventories. The revised thematic structure asks what shared meaning organises those observations.

For example, comments about tutoring, scaffolding, and topic choice are brought together as conditions that enable researcher-becoming, while workload and organisational difficulties are interpreted as constraints on sustaining an emergent researcher identity. This movement from topical categorisation to organising concepts is central to a reflexive thematic account.

6. Methodological Reflection and Transferable Lessons

6.1 Practitioner Proximity Must Be Analysed, Not Merely Declared

Insider knowledge can support sensitive interviewing and contextual interpretation, but the statement that the researcher is a practitioner is not sufficient reflexivity. Researchers should identify how their role may shape who participates, what is sayable, which accounts feel familiar, and which interpretations become immediately plausible. Reflexive notes are most useful when they record concrete moments of attraction, discomfort, surprise, defensiveness, or assumed understanding and then examine how these responses influence analytic choices.

A further implication is that reflexivity benefits from being temporally distributed across the project. Notes made immediately after interviews can capture interpersonal dynamics and moments of surprise; coding memos can record why a segment attracted attention; theme-development notes can document why competing interpretations were retained, rejected, or reworked. Taken together, these records create a reflexive audit trail of interpretive movement without implying that analysis can be made objective through documentation. For practitioner-researchers, this is particularly valuable because familiarity can otherwise render assumptions invisible precisely when they feel most natural.

6.2 Bounded Contexts Require Anonymity beyond Pseudonyms

In bounded professional communities, role combinations and distinctive organisational experiences can identify participants even when names are removed. Anonymity therefore requires attention to deductive disclosure. Generalising the institution, programme labels, internal structures, and distinctive policy details can be ethically preferable when those details are not essential to the analytic claim. Excerpts should be selected for analytic value while considering the cumulative identifiability created by multiple quotations.

6.3 Participant Response Influence as an Analytic Issue as Well as a Recruitment Issue

When participants know the researcher professionally, response patterns shaped by perceived professional expectations cannot be assumed away through consent procedures. Interview design should explicitly invite disagreement, difficulty, and mixed experiences.

During analysis, predominantly positive accounts should prompt questions about what conditions made criticism easier or harder to express. Dissonant data should be examined for what they do to the developing interpretation rather than treated as exceptions to be tidied away.

6.4 Software Supports an Audit Trail; It Does Not Produce Themes

MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021) and other qualitative data analytic software tools can strengthen analytic organisation by enabling retrieval, comparison, memoing, and iterative recoding. Yet the interpretive labour remains with the researcher. Reporting should therefore specify what the software enabled while avoiding language that attributes theme discovery or analytic objectivity to the program. A transparent account of software use can support the credibility of the process.

6.5 A Worked RTA Example Should Show Interpretive Movement

Naming the six phases is insufficient as methodological reflection. Readers benefit from seeing how an extract was noticed, how it was coded, how codes were clustered or rethought, why candidate themes were merged or separated, and how final theme names express an organising concept. Such examples are not recipes for replication. They support methodological transferability by showing the reasoning that another researcher might adapt to a comparable context.

6.6 Quality in RTA Depends on Coherence Rather than Agreement Metrics

The study's relativist and subjectivist positioning is coherent with an RTA approach that values researcher reflexivity and interpretive responsibility. Themes are generated and interpreted reflexively by the researcher. Quality is better demonstrated through conceptual coherence, rich engagement, transparent analytic decisions, compelling evidence, reflexive accountability, and an interpretation that is both situated and useful (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022, 2023).

6.7 Limitations

The study is situated in one vocational higher education context and includes six lecturers with experience of postgraduate research education. The analysis is therefore not intended to represent all lecturers or all vocational institutions. Practitioner proximity may have enabled contextual depth while also influencing disclosure and interpretation. The revised anonymisation strategy intentionally removes some contextual specificity to reduce deductive identification; this ethical choice also limits the level of organisational detail that can be reported. Finally, the analytic pathway table is a retrospective transparency device based on the reported dataset and should not be read as a mechanical record of linear theme production.

7. Conclusion

Postgraduate research engagement shaped participants' identities by strengthening methodological confidence, scholarly agency, and the sense that research could form part of who they were as lecturers and professionals in a vocational higher education institution. These developments were relational and conditional: supportive pedagogies, meaningful topic ownership, scholarly belonging, time, and workload arrangements all influenced whether researcher identity could be sustained. Ambivalent experiences were not peripheral to the analysis; they showed that becoming a researcher can involve confidence and constraint at the same time.

Methodologically, the study provides an applied account of RTA conducted by a practitioner-researcher within a vocational higher education setting. Its transferable contribution lies not in replication but in guidance for adaptation: make the researcher's interpretive role explicit; document how software supports rather than substitutes for analysis; show movement from data to codes and themes; actively analyse dissonance; treat institutional and relational influence on participant accounts as an ongoing reflexive concern; and protect anonymity at the level of contextual combinations, not names alone. These practices can support more transparent, ethically attentive, and conceptually coherent RTA in similarly bounded educational and professional contexts.

Ethical Approval: The study involved human participants and followed procedural, situational, and relational ethical principles. Ethical approval was obtained from the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Confidentiality, voluntariness, and anonymity were addressed throughout data generation, analysis, and reporting.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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