Review Article

Being an academic: a process of becoming

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Abstract. This paper presents an autobiographical narrative outlining some of the key milestones of the author's academic journey as evident in his publications in the three inter-related strands that mark his scholarship, namely the links between education, work and employment, teacher education, and international and comparative education. The author draws on over thirty years of experience in research with a view to sharing hard-won insights with early-stage researchers and scholars embarking on an academic career. He notes that while steadfast work is the key ingredient of attaining international recognition in one's field, luck, being in the right place at the right time, and the enabling influence of mentors are also important, as is the capacity of making the best of opportunities that arise. In his view, however, the litmus test of a successful career is the extent to which intellectual labour promotes the common good.

Keywords: educational research, career development, career planning, academia

1 Introduction

It is indeed a privilege and an honour to be invited by *Xjenza* to feature in this special issue, where senior academics have been asked to showcase their research in their particular field of expertise. There are, of course, many ways of responding to such an invitation, and much depends on the kind of audience one has in mind when one writes. In my case, it is the early-stage researcher/beginning academic that I imagined as the reader of this narrative. Those with a background in the social sciences generally, and education in particular, are more likely to find what I have to say directly relevant. Nevertheless, others might find this series of reflections of interest as they strive to craft an academic career for themselves.

I have adopted an autobiographical approach, not only because this is an engaging style, but also because of my firm conviction that the personal and the professional are difficult if not impossible to keep apart (Sultana, 2011a). The choice of research area, the theoretical lenses we are attracted to, the motivation that keeps us going through the hard times – one and all are rooted in our life experiences, as other colleagues have noted (Darmanin, 2011; Mayo, 2013). Being aware of this and acknowledging the influence of our background – including such ascriptions as social class, gender, and ethnicity – on our way of thinking, being, and feeling is crucial. In the social sciences in particular, the dominant approach to knowledge building is that there is no view from nowhere. Being aware of one's 'positionality' (Rowe, 2014) goes some way in bracketing prejudice and bias, and problematising that which we think of as 'natural' and 'normal'.

Autobiographic writing is also 'performative' (Holmes, 2009), a social and literary artefact (Shands et al., 2015): an author's claims to "tell it the way it is" need to be considered in the light of the power relations that are inevitably wielded for effect, including what is said and what is left unsaid, what is foregrounded and what is relegated to the background, and how style and rhetorical devices are used to create a desired effect. Autobiographical writing is also infused by tropes or motifs that tend to recur in this genre, such as the protagonist "making it against all odds", or "being driven by destiny", or "it all makes sense now", among others (Convery, 1999). This is not to say that autobiography is fiction. Rather, it is to stress that there are many ways of narrating the same life, with autobiography being just one of them.

2 Who am I?

I am now 63 years old. It is a dangerous age, when one starts looking back at one's achievements, wondering whether one has peaked, and when perhaps one does not dare look to the future and its halls of shadows. The fire in the belly has become embers: less dramatic perhaps,

but still able to cook the food slowly, possibly bringing out the flavours better. Questions arise as to what one could have done more, or perhaps less and better, whether one has been driven by personal career ambitions rather more than by the common good, and whether choices made were the right ones. It is also a time to try to find meaning and patterns and compass points that lead to where one is now. As the philosopher Kierkegaard famously said: "Life can only be understood backwards. . . even if it must be lived forwards".

The bare facts of my life are that I grew up in an upwardly mobile middle-class family, in a place and at a time when people were known by their kinfolk's nicknames, where life often spilled into the streets, and where the church and politics structured lives as much as convictions. I did well at school, even if, as a scholarship boy at an élite school, whole areas of knowledge seemed to slip away given that they were taught in English, a language I knew from books, but not from everyday interaction at home. Family life provided a shelter, but was also stifling at times, and I was lucky enough to expand my horizons in my teens when I joined a community-based organisation (Sultana, 1996), led by inspirational educators who helped me develop qualities that I did not even know I had, and which formal schooling generally failed to recognise. This is when, at the age of 15, I fell in love with teaching, and with the sheer magical experience of using words to enthral a group of youngsters, of organising events that brought out the best in learners, and of establishing mentoring relationships that opened up a universe of deeply meaningful conversations.

My parents' 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) and what they considered the 'horizons of possibility' (Hodkinson et al., 1996) for their children were limited, and despite good results they encouraged me to sit for a competitive exam to become a bank clerk. . . an exam that I (luckily?) failed. As a default I followed my elder sister into university where, like her, I graduated with a first-class honours. A stint as a teacher was followed by a Commonwealth Scholarship at Reading University, where I trained as a career guidance and counsellor. The Distinction I was awarded there set me up for another grant, which this time took me to New Zealand, where I obtained my PhD in educational sociology with a thesis that focused on transition from school to work. Doctorates were still a rarity in Malta those days, and having one almost automatically opened doors to a university post. I joined the Faculty of Education, and am still a member 33 years later, besides also being the founding Director of the *Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research*. Grants took me to Stanford University in 1990, (where I was a Fulbright Fellow for four months), and to Paris in

the summer of 1992 (where I embarked on a post-doctoral research project on education and the European Union), with the latest award being an Honorary Doctorate granted in 2020 by Université Laval (Quebec) in acknowledgement of what that institution generously considered to be "exemplary and outstanding achievement and influence".

Such recognition should not obscure the feelings of self-doubt, the lows that came with the highs, the homesickness that was the other side of the excitement of being away, the pre-internet/pre-EU membership sense of isolation when Malta felt a prison as much as a haven, the constant stress of trying to keep up with the latest research, the drubbing by reviewers of papers that one proudly submits, the stomach-churning anxiety (which never really goes away) of facing a crowd when presenting at a conference (or the dejection felt when only a handful turn up to one's session) . . . not to mention the difficulties of finding a balance between the demands of parenthood and of academia. And yet, here we are, thanks to hard work, for sure, but also thanks to the sheer luck of being at the right place at the right time, and to the helping hand of mentors who opened doors – and sometimes wallets – to see me through.

3   Research strands

Taking the cue from Kierkegaard by looking back in an effort to join the dots that mark my past, I see three main strands in my research output, a reflection of the multiple demands that are typically made on scholars in small states. Such multi-functionality (Farrugia et al., 1989) was initially a source of intense frustration, and that for two reasons. First, breadth often comes at the expense of depth. Second, it is difficult to establish oneself internationally unless one's name and work are associated with a specific field. This is not just a function of the quality of work produced: it also has to do with the way knowledge networks operate, and the difficulties in keeping up with the dynamics inherent to the field, including attending key events, being part of an executive committee of the field's association, contributing to projects and Special Interest Groups, and so on. With time, however, I came to realise that there is quite a robust demand for 'gifted generalists' whose 'flexible specialisation' (Baldacchino, 2019) leads them to 'speak' different technical languages, affording a better grasp of how the different parts fit in and contribute to the whole. This of course entails more work as one has to keep up with developments in more than one distinct area of knowledge. It also became increasingly obvious to me that depth can be achieved in more ways than one: the rhizomatic nature of knowledge is such that planting one's academic roots in diverse places can lead to making connections that were previously not imagined,

potentially leading to new insights.

The field in which I flourished as an academic is education, a broad enough area that allowed me to 'husband' three related garden patches, namely [1] the links between education, work and employment [2] teacher education, and [3] comparative education. All my work in these three areas is informed by an engagement with sociology (and in particular critical social theory), and to some extent with philosophy, economics, history, and psychology, an interest that flows naturally from attempts to understand the interactions between individuals and society, and between agency and structure in particular historical conjunctures. At one level, therefore, I am fully committed to multidisciplinarity, recognising that disciplinary boundaries have been historically constructed and often have to do more with the power of 'academic tribes' (Trowler, 2014) in delineating and claiming exclusive expertise than with anything else. I do recognise, however, that different fields of knowledge have developed their own disciplinary cultures (Becher, 1981), which include competing epistemological and methodological orientations that can give rise to a diversity of insights. For this reason, interdisciplinarity is a bit trickier, as one might find oneself operating with different, even contradictory assumptions.

The primary value of each of the disciplines mentioned above – over and above their intrinsic worth – is the lenses they provide in order to see and interpret the phenomena around us, and to act on the basis of those insights. In my case, the gravitational pull that weaves the different disciplinary strands together is social justice (Hooley et al., 2018, 2019; Sultana, 2014)[1] broadly defined. This entails looking at society as a human accomplishment, where different and conflicting interests are inevitably present, and where intellectual and practical work, dialectically conceived, can help us understand the world and render it more just. Critical social theory, no less than critical psychology and critical economics provide us with penetrating insights about the human condition, about the way wealth and life chances are produced and distributed, and how subjectivities are shaped by, among others, formal education. The value of both history and comparative studies – i.e., comparison across space and time (Sultana, 2017b) – is that they alert us to the crucial fact that "another world is possible" . . . assuming, of course, that there will be any world to speak of, given the climate emergency. Human-made social and ecological damage calls for what my colleague Peter Mayo calls 'a politics of indignation' (2012), where education cannot but be implicated.

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[1]For the purpose of this article, I only refer to a selection of the main books and/or papers about specific themes. A more comprehensive list of publications is available here: https://www.um.edu.mt/emcer/ourresearch/ourpublications.

3.1 The links between education, work and employment

Starting first with the links between education and work. As Watts (1983) notes, a consideration of these bonds opens up at least four strands of inquiry, focusing on [a] the teaching of technical and vocational competences (TVET skilling); [b] the way schools teach/socialise the up-coming generation about/for work (career education); [c] the orientation of students towards different sectors in an increasingly complex labour market (career guidance); and [d] the ranking by schools of students according to 'ability', thus (in principle at least) facilitating meritocracy (selection).

For a reason I cannot entirely fathom – my first degree is in English after all – I have spent most of my academic life working on this particular area and its four research components. Happenstance partly explains why this is the case: my initial commitment to post-graduate work was to personal counselling – a 'catcher in the rye' syndrome that was instilled in me during my teenage years and which I have never entirely shaken off. However, when I took up doctoral studies in New Zealand, the most suitable supervisor I could find – Peter Ramsay – was more of a sociologist than a psychologist. This led me to carry out a multi-sited ethnography looking at and comparing the way three schools prepared their students for work (Sultana, 1988a), in some ways along the lines of the classic study by Paul Willis (1977), who had tried to understand how schools are implicated in social reproduction, with working class kids ending up in working class jobs. That PhD led to several publications in peer reviewed international journals (inter alia Sultana, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1990d, 1992b) – a wise move since, despite all good intentions, one is unlikely to single-mindedly invest so much time in a research project once lecturing, administration and family commitments take over significant chunks of one's life. These publications generated their own dynamics, in terms of personal investment, the expertise acquired, the reputation earned, and the opportunities they opened up. One netted me the Caltex Prize (Sultana, 1988b), which involved a welcome monetary award.

Another reason for the research interest in exploring the links between education and work is that this is what we could call a 'generative theme' (Freire, 1972): the topic opens up a multitude of important conversations such as: should schools mirror or challenge the way work is conceived in contemporary society? How do schools socialise students into a work ethic and work-related values? Do schools primarily emphasise and justify hierarchy or are they laboratories of democracy? How do schools feed into – or challenge – the classed, gendered, and racialised division of labour? Do schools open up opportunities

and encourage aspirations in all students, or are they implicated in 'warming up' some while 'cooling out' others? Should technical and vocational skills be taught at school? What can be said about the political economy of the curriculum, and what does this tell us about which knowledge is valued, and how it is rewarded? Should schools be involved in sorting out students according to some notion of ability, and direct them to corresponding segments of the labour market? How do such selection mechanisms work in the interest of some and against the interest of others? How do employers 'read' the formal education qualification system when it comes to recruiting workers? What impact does globalisation have on the relationships between formal education and work? What do tracer studies tell us about the course-related work that graduates take up?

The list of research questions is practically interminable, and in my career, I have tried to engage with as many of these issues as I could, both as a researcher and as a member of international projects. A few examples will suffice to give a sense of the breadth of work done in this area.

3.2   TVET and selection

Beyond the doctoral research, I embarked on a four-year-long study about the history of vocational schooling in Malta, looking at its intersections with class and gender interests, as well as ideological and economic aspirations of post-independent Malta (Sultana, 1992a, 1995a, 1995d). This served to ground me back in my home country, which I found to be essential to keep a balance between making a local input while engaging with international projects. . . a balance that many scholars in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries find difficult to maintain, given the choice between publishing globally and perishing locally, or publishing locally and perishing globally (Hanafi, 2011). The research project established my name in the area known as TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training), which was increasingly at the forefront of the European Commission's concerns, especially in the light of its aspiration "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world". This was also the time when worldwide there was a trend to 'vocationalise' education at all levels, and to bring the two worlds of the economy and of schooling closer to each other (Carnoy et al., 1985; Grubb et al., 2004). As with many others, I have critiqued this neoliberal emphasis which reduces education to narrow skilling (Sultana, 1987, 2012b), making a travesty of education, besides being underpinned by dubious economic arguments (and motives) to boot (Brown et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2020).

The examination of vocational tracks in Malta in what were then known as trade schools showed how these streams almost exclusively attracted students from the manual, working class, and gave them a diluted general education, in addition to work-related skills, that ultimately closed down the opportunities for social mobility, directing them back to the manual labouring class they originated from. This was, yet again, an example of Willis' (1977) theme in his book *Learning to Labour*, with work ethic and 'appropriate' work-related behaviour being drummed into the students who, I argued, were not getting their educational entitlement as citizens. Despite the government of that day having a penchant for comprehensive education (Zammit Marmarà, 2017), the economic development plans for the country required a class of skilled and semi-skilled tradespersons to work in the factories, including in the newly established textile industry. Here then was selection operating presumably on the basis of academic ability, but which, as sociologists like Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) have pointed out, is really based on class.

My critique of trade schooling in Malta fed into a movement that saw them being phased out and replaced by the expanded remit of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), set up in 2001. I was one of the policy advisers on this reform, and while I am still convinced that this was the right way to go, it would have also made sense to have vocational options within the curriculum of general secondary education, as we have now. Many students who would have been directed towards trade schools could not find anything much in the general academic schooling they were offered in the reformed secondary education sector, with parents complaining that it was becoming difficult to force their children to go to school and that in trade schools they had at least learnt something useful. Teachers too were not overjoyed that their classes now had a different student profile, with some openly resisting efforts to being 'schooled'.

This was an important learning experience for me: my first foray into so-called 'evidence-based' policy work proved challenging since with education there never seems to be a straightforward and predictable answer: 'perverse effects' keep sprouting up, and what you gain on the one hand you tend lose on the other. Few countries have managed to overcome the dilemma between keeping students together to enhance social equity and cohesion, while offering a differentiated curricular diet that satisfies every student's taste. That has proved to be especially difficult in Malta, given that 40% of students attend the non-state school sector where, despite in principle following the same curriculum as state schools, tend to attract a different type of intake, socialise their students in ways

that encourage higher attainment, and direct them more robustly towards higher education (Darmanin, 2003). Add to the mix the impact this has on state school teacher morale and expectations, as well as 'peer effects', and one can begin to understand why, despite substantial investment in education, Malta trails behind in the international student assessments we have participated in, such as PISA and PIRLS (e.g. PISA National Centre, 2018).

My work in the TVET area took on an international dimension largely thanks to CEDEFOP, one of the EU's agencies focusing on technical and vocational education and based in Thessaloniki, who I helped set up a network of TVET teacher training institutions (TTNet). I also became increasingly involved in development work, mostly with such agencies as the GIZ (*Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*, i.e., Society for International Cooperation), UNESCO, UNRWA, and Save the Children, among others, where TVET issues played a significant part in the effort to provide the skills needed by such countries and territories as Albania, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey (e.g. Sultana, 2008a). As I will note further on, involvement in these kinds of contexts obliges one to rethink much of what one has learnt to take for granted about education and its links with society, leading to sharper thinking about the complex interaction between the local and the global.

3.3 Career education and guidance

The area I have most worked on over the past 20-odd years in respect to the links between education and employment is career education and guidance. I had done some work on this locally, first as a guidance counsellor in schools, and then as an academic. I helped in the introduction of a related new curricular area called Personal and Social Education (Sultana, 1992c), and put together an edited volume of readings on key topics in the subject (Sultana et al., 1997). At the launch of the book, we invited to Malta one of the best-known names in the field to address the audience, Tony Watts: he heard me give my speech, turned to me afterwards and said: "One of these days we must do some work together". We lost touch for several years, until I received a telephone call from him asking me whether I wanted to be involved in an international project he was co-leading. The rest, as they say, is history: it led to making an input in OECD work in the area, writing a series of technical reports for the European Commission, and to travel the world over researching, writing, speaking at public events, providing training and policy advice, and learning much from my interaction with others working in the same or related fields. My comparative research on career education and guidance focused on services in both the education and

the public employment sectors, and initially looked at the then 11 candidate countries to the EU (Sultana, 2003) , then on all the EU members states (Sultana et al., 2006; Watts et al., 2007) and finally on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Sultana, 2017a; Sultana et al., 2008).

On the basis of such studies, I was engaged as expert to the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, helping promote critical studies of career education (also known as Career Management Skills) at a time when school-to-work curricula were becoming increasingly attractive (Sultana, 2012b). My focus on career guidance involved different aspects related to policy (e.g. Watts et al., 2004); curriculum development (e.g. Hooley et al., 2013), and training (e.g. Sultana, 2018) leading to several publications, including two edited volumes published by Routledge triggering a social justice turn in the field (Hooley et al., 2018, 2019). More recently, I co-edited a special journal issue dedicated to the integration of migrants and refugees in the labour market (Fejes et al., 2021).

In this area again, therefore, hard work, luck, and the helping hand of a mentor proved crucial in shaping a very important part of my career.

3.4 Teacher education

While the Faculty of Education has a broad remit over several aspects of education, and provides a space for its members to look beyond schooling (Baldacchino et al., 1997), its core mission remains that of preparing graduates for the teaching profession. For many years, therefore, teacher education was also quite central to my university-based work, and to my practical and research interests. Education and teaching are not a science in the same way that Physics or Chemistry are: there are no formulas or recipes that are likely to 'guarantee' success, simply because the variables are too great. The same educational strategy or approach that succeeds with one group will fail with another, or even with the same group on a different day. Despite advances in neuroscience, predictability and repeatability do not feature much in teaching, which is why it deserves to be considered a profession, and why it is both an art and a craft (Dewey, 1929). It also requires moral as much as physical and intellectual stamina, as it endeavours to do no less than to pass on to the upcoming generation the best that humanity has achieved, while alerting them to the worst so that they avoid it and transcend it, creatively engaging with the world as it is to imagine a world as it could and should be.

Preparing teachers for such an onerous and demanding yet essential undertaking requires a constant interaction between theory and practice, with one feeding the other in a never-ending cycle of reflection and action. Getting

this balance 'right' has been another major preoccupation in my university career, and in a way, I have also tried to engage with the theory/practice dialectic by drawing on my everyday experiences in lecturing, thesis supervision, practicum mentoring, and educational leadership (as Head of Department and Dean), making it the subject of formal analysis. This led to a number of publications, looking at, for instance, approaches to initial teacher education (Sultana, 2005), the enactment of critical pedagogy in local schools (Sultana, 1995b), textbooks with reflections on such key educational themes as streaming, the impact of social class, and parental involvement (e.g. Sultana, 1991), as well as projects, mostly with colleagues, chief among them being the *Tomorrow's Schools* (Wain et al., 1995) and *Tomorrow's Teachers* initiatives and subsequent activities that led to significant reforms in teacher training modalities (Sultana, 1999; Sultana et al., 2019).

One particularly successful initiative which ticked many boxes in terms of meaningful academic work was the gathering around me of several undergraduate and postgraduate students who, for their thesis under my supervision, worked with the same Grounded Theory methodology, looking at different aspects of schools in Malta through an equity lens. The group of students shared their data, discussed insights, benefited from each other's feedback, and prepared a chapter for a volume that was used for several years as a reader during sociology of education classes (Sultana, 1997). Each chapter, once duly edited, was published in the students' names. That volume was the first to ground sociological reflection in Maltese qualitative data generated by students, followed up by another collection focusing on a sociology of Maltese society more generally (Sultana et al., 2004). It was also one of the more satisfying collaborative projects carried out locally, which I regret not having repeated with other groups of students as it serves as an excellent form of academic apprenticeship. It moreover led to relationships that overcame the usual expert-student hierarchy, where we worked together to not only get the book off the ground, but also to do some political work in schools, promoting a more humanistic type of education that upheld students' rights (Muviment Edukazzjoni Umana – (Sultana, 1992d)), and encouraging power sharing through parental involvement (Assoċjazzjoni Kunsilli Skolastiċi – (Sultana, 1994b)).

Other projects linked to teacher education, as well as to my interests in comparative education, include a special volume published by Peter Lang on the challenges faced by Mediterranean countries in preparing teachers for teaching in schools that, in many cases, have not yet adopted learner-centred and progressive pedagogies (Sultana, 2002). Related to the same theme was a project coordinated by Malak Zaalouk – erstwhile UNICEF dir-

ector for education in the MENA region, and founder of the community and girl-friendly schools in Egypt – who led a major project on the reform of teacher education faculties in several Arab states, and with whom I published a volume highlighting the main findings (Zaalouk et al., 2016).

3.5   International and Comparative education

A third research strand in my academic career involves international and comparative work in education, a strand which is woven into most of my research interests. An important aspect of work in this area started when the University adopted the idea of serving as a hub in the Mediterranean, a joined-up policy vision that had also been adopted by other sectors on the island such as the Freeport and financial services, with the new Mater Dei hospital being the most recent iteration of the same hub idea. The notion resonated with me and, ambitious upstart that I was, decided to set up a Comparative Education Programme focusing on education across the Mediterranean, with the full support of Kenneth Wain, who was dean at that time. This included the launch of the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* in 1996, the setting up of a network of education scholars in the region, and the organisation of seminars on specific themes, leading to publications on educational innovation (Sultana, 2001), and on teacher education (Sultana, 2002), among others. Funding for the activities came through UNESCO and other European cultural agencies that saw value in what we were trying to achieve. Local colleagues – chief among them being Carmel Borg, Michael Buhagiar, Simone Galea, and Peter Mayo – were also very supportive and contributed to the achievements of the initiative.

As the saying goes, one thing led to another, and all the work invested in and through the Comparative Education Programme started paying off. Here again, effort was supplemented by luck and another unexpected mentor. I gave a talk about the work we were doing at a seminar organised locally in 1999, which happened to be attended by the UNICEF regional director for education in the MENA region, Frank Dall. He liked what he heard, and there and then invited me to carry out a series of qualitative studies about educational innovation in the region, with a view to showcasing interesting practice that could serve as a source of inspiration to others.

Over the next several years I carried out such studies on behalf of UNICEF and other UN and EU agencies. These reinforced my engagement with the field of education for development, which was most valuable in helping me understand facets of schooling that are not often considered in the global North. Most studies involved short country visits to carry out fieldwork with the help of cultural me-

diators and interpreters, accompanied by extensive desk research at home. My travels took me across the region, with each study resulting in at least one book or article (*inter alia* Sultana, 2006a, 2006b, 2008b). Such experiences led to much reflection on the importance of developing indigenous theoretical frameworks grounded in local realities. In line with my effort to reflect critically on my action in the field, I describe the impact these experiences had on me personally, not least in confronting, in a most visceral manner, biases and prejudices, as well as the southern heritage that informs my identity as a Maltese who thought of himself as primarily a 'European' (Sultana, 2011b).

Malta's entry in the EU stimulated critical reflection on the impact of membership on education (Kuhn et al., 2006; Sultana, 1994a, 1995c), and opened up further possibilities for funding, networking, and participation in international projects. Opportunities for those working on Mediterranean studies multiplied given the EU's commitment to the region, formalised in 1995 when the Barcelona Declaration launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The goal of creating an area of peace, shared prosperity, and human and cultural exchanges implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, highlighted the role that education could play in reaching these objectives. The initiatives taken within the ambit of the Comparative Education Programme became increasingly relevant, with the University upgrading the Programme to an autonomous research centre, EMCER.

Funding was generated through projects, with scholars becoming involved throughout the duration of the project, and then moving on. Others – both local and overseas colleagues – became a mainstay of the Centre's activities, often contributing quite generously despite little if any remuneration. Thanks to their support, further initiatives were undertaken. Among the most significant was the launch of a Master's programme in comparative education, a joint Master's degree on education and development, the publication of the landmark World Yearbook on *Education and the Arab 'world'* (Mazawi et al., 2010), and the transformation of the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* into a thematic series with Sense (now taken over by Brill). EMCER thematic volumes from 1996 to today include a focus on science education, special education, critical educators, private tutoring, power and education, higher education, career guidance, art education, literature, socio-emotional learning, and educational leadership. Several more volumes are currently in preparation. In most cases the editorial team's tasks went beyond reviews of content to language editing, and while onerous and time consuming, and hardly ever acknowledged, it does help new voices to emerge and to

create possibilities for conversations between the global North and South.

4   Parting shots

I'd like to conclude by drawing some threads together in order to reiterate key lessons learnt during my 33 years in higher education, hoping that this proves of benefit to early-stage researchers and those embarking on their university career.

First, as noted at different points in this paper, a successful academic career is the result of hard and persistent work, but also of luck, being in the right place at the right time, and having mentors who provide opportunities. It is also dependent on what one makes of these opportunities: my experience has been that if one performs well in a particular endeavour, one way or another this will be noted by the people who matter: while meritocracy is flawed in many countries, ultimately competence is what organisations are looking for, and what they are ready to reward. The problem with opportunities is to know what to invest in and what to let go by. At the start of my international work, so many opportunities came my way that I was anxious not to miss any of them, in the belief that one should "ride the wave" as long as it lasts. This of course led to overwork at times, which I (and my family!) were ready to endure knowing that if one allowed oneself to fall outside of the 'loop', one could easily be forgotten as leaders of organisations and networks change, bringing with them their own trusted contacts on board. As I got older, however, I could allow myself to be more discriminating in my choices, and less concerned about visibility and presence in a multiplicity of forums.

Second, one should ask what one is after when embarking on an academic career. 'Success' within a fast-changing university environment is today often defined in terms of numbers: how many students one attracts, how much project money one generates, how many publications one has, and how many citations of one's work feature in databases. Some of these may indeed be indicators of quality, but the danger of what has been called 'governance by numbers' (Shore et al., 2015) is that one confuses quantity with quality, and worse still, that one loses sight of our role as contributors to the public good (Sultana, 2012a). That should be the litmus test for a successful career.

Third, one needs to be philosophic and level-headed about one's achievements: it is very easy to fall into the trap of being so obsessed by one's work that one loses a sense of proportion. It is depressing to see a world-weary academic, but even more depressing than that is an academic that gives in to hubris. We may think of ourselves as important, but in the grand scheme of things,

few of us will do more than work in the 'protective belt' of paradigms generated by others. There is, of course, value in adding, modifying, challenging, revisiting, criticising, revealing new facets, and commenting on the 'hard core' of established knowledge, but swagger and conceit are not the hallmarks of scholarship: wise is the wo/man who knows that s/he does not know. This is perhaps old school, and I do understand that it is important not to be too self-effacing, and that one needs to 'market' oneself in order to avoid being ignored, or to let the mediocre steal the limelight simply because they shamelessly trumpet their 'achievements' or because they are well-connected. Besides, too much humility is often nothing but pride being coy. And yet, in keeping a balance, it might be better to err on the side of modesty. One way I have found to combat the natural tendency to think too highly of oneself is to work with others who are more gifted, have a sharper mind, and are able to see things that fall beneath my intellectual radar. I personally find that necessary, if admittedly not very soothing for one's ego.

Fourth, one can never be sure about what happens to one's work. I have written papers which I thought were valuable and worth reading, and they languished away in books or journals, with few if any citing them. And I have also written papers that I would not consider outstanding which have not only been cited, but got me invited as a keynote speaker in several countries. Go figure! As a visiting scholar once told me, writing is like popping a message in a bottle: you throw it in the sea, not knowing if anyone will ever pick it up. He also advised that what matters is to do one's best, and then let one's writing go ... hoping it is found to be helpful in one way or another, some day. True there are ways of promoting one's work, through reviews, giving papers at conferences, using social media, and making one's work available through open access and the Creative Commons, but unless one has something of substance to say, all that may be immoderate, another example of the shallow and the more unsavoury and glib part of the academic game. And while one is often obliged to 'play the game', the calamity starts when the game plays us.

In conclusion, while younger researchers are likely to find little solace in the fact that life can only be understood backwards, it is hoped that the sharing of the life stories of older academics provides a vicarious glimpse at a 'past', a 'back to the future' moment that could help one contemplate on how they will craft their career over the coming years.

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