

Why work in academia? A comparative analysis of motivation and prestige factors of academics in different national contexts.

Abstract

The introduction of performance-related management into universities in recent years has altered what is valued in academia, in both economic and non-economic capacities. Academic motivation and national and institutional reward schemes are explored using the literature. An anthropological term “prestige economy” is defined and located as part of a three-part model, and its application to higher education is explored, using a socio-cultural approach rooted in Bourdieu’s analyses of academic life. This is used to analyse the impact on academic roles, including teaching, research and service. Key points about the impact of national frameworks on academics’ motivation are discussed, along with a discussion of how such frameworks can help, or hinder, institutional aims and goals.

Long abstract

Being an academic often now includes engaging in highly applied research that may be closely linked with industry (Gibbons et al, 1994; Molas-Gallart et al, 2002). Although the extrinsic motivator of money is widely used in many societies, there is *prima facie* evidence that some academic work is not motivated principally in this way. Much academic activity is not financially advantageous, including many collegial activities (McNay, 1995), such as reviewing journal articles and research grant applications (Lamont, 2009). At times of budgetary cutbacks, increasing workloads and associated stress, an understanding of academic motivation seems vital. An account of faculty motivation must therefore move beyond conventional accounts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and find ways of capturing the social aspects of motivation that are associated with the disciplinary and professional groups within which faculty are located.

There is a large literature on motivation in general and within work in particular, but little draws on and illuminates life in HE. This study is based on a model of academic motivation framed as ‘overlapping’ and ‘associated’ economies. Central to this is the idea of a ‘prestige economy’, an anthropological term describing organised patterns of exchange which stand outside a conventional market economy (Bascom 1948; English, 2005; Grinev 2005; Herskovits 1948). This study builds on two previous projects, one completed that investigated notions of motivation and reward with interdisciplinary academics in two national contexts (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2010; 2011; Kandiko & Blackmore, 2008) and another project that explored academic motivation in the UK (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2009). A major finding in these projects was that of academic motivation. This was influenced by hiring and promotion policies, across disciplinary, institutional and national contexts. The project highlighted the importance of perceived career pathways and reward schemes in academics’ motivation.

This paper reports on a project investigating academic motivation and perceptions of the role of prestige factors—those that carry honour, respect and standing—in different national HE contexts. This small-scale study explores if and how the prestige economy concept may factor in international comparison and academics’ conception of role and identity. Although not

representative of national context, this paper looks at the interaction between national factors and institutional and departmental levels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four to five key staff, using critical incidents to explore career trajectories, including appointment, promotion and recognition. Focus groups were conducted with a range of staff, exploring shared and competing understandings of departmental, disciplinary and institutional values and practices. Interviews were done with academics in two different departments each in America, Ireland and Iceland (14 individual interviews and 20 focus group participants), and compared with previously collected data from five departments in England (for a total of 60 participants in 32 individual interviews and 28 focus group participants).

Major themes emerged around levels and locations of prestige in the previous work done in England. The interviews conducted in America drew to attention the notion of 'networks' of prestige, and the importance of national and regional institutional hierarchies. In Iceland, the development of a 'research points' system with an institution, with individual high-stakes cash rewards, funnelled notions of prestige, leading to a valuing of international, peer-reviewed journal articles. In Ireland, the lack of national frameworks did not impede the pressures academics faced to produce 'prestigious' research, and tensions were high due to hiring and promotion freezes and increasing numbers of short-term contracts. Analysis of the data will be completed by the time of the conference.

Making initial national comparisons, the RAE/REF scheme in the UK directed academics to particular research outputs and targets. The tenure system and institutional differentiation and hierarchy in the US made academics much more departmentally and institutionally-focused in the promotion process. For post-tenure academics, there was much greater freedom to pursue 'gratifying' and 'useful' research. Notions of having completed academic apprenticeships through academic-administrative roles, such as Head of Department and Dean, then conferred greater academic autonomy also surfaced. There was also a distinct notion of mentoring junior staff as a key motivator and marker of prestige within the department. In Ireland and Iceland, the specific national contexts and economic crises seemed to impact what was seen as being valued in academia. In Iceland pay was at stake, although jobs were relatively secure. In Ireland, the development of internal research assessment schemes to promote research activity were confounded by national hiring and promotion freezes, leading to workload stress. The cases of Ireland and Iceland, in different ways, both showed the significant role that the monetary economy plays in academic motivation.

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