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## **Culture and Curriculum Change: A Prestige Economy Analysis**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

This paper explores culture and curriculum change as part of a wider research and evaluation exercise of strategic reform at a UK-based research-intensive institution. This paper uses a case study of an institution mid-way through a curriculum change process, promoting active learning processes, diverse assessment and an inclusive environment to support learning and well-being. The project utilises concept map-mediated semi-structured interviews to capture multiple data artefacts across interviews with 20 members of staff over 3 years. Interview data is triangulated with the programme-level approach to the change process, drawing on discourse analysis of documentation of the process as well as programme-level and institutional-level evaluation indicators. This research, in the context of large-scale policy and institutional change, highlights perceptions of the role of prestige in relation to research and teaching, sense of empowerment towards change, hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors on academic identities and motivation.

### **Full paper**

Many institutions are making large-scale changes to various aspects of the educational experience, partially in response to regulatory requirements such as rationalising the relationship between teaching and research (Fung 2017); changes to marking and grading schemes

(Ratcliffe 2019); and attainment gaps across socio-demographic characteristics (Ross et al 2018). This paper reports on a project exploring culture and curriculum change that is part of a wider research and evaluation exercise of strategic reform at a UK-based research-intensive institution. The educational effects of curriculum change are notoriously difficult to evaluate due to the large number of variables and the lengthy timeframes (Blackmore and Kandiko 2012). This paper uses a case study of an institution mid-way through a curriculum change process, promoting active learning processes, diverse forms of assessment and an inclusive environment to support student learning and well-being through a Learning and Teaching Strategy.

This project explores staff members' perception of their ability and sense of empowerment towards change (Annala and Mäkinen 2017; Honkimäki et al 2022); perception and prestige of research and teaching activities; and the impact of new teaching-based job roles. The term "prestige economy" is used to describe the collection of beliefs, values and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly (English 2005). The project uses the department as a focal point, as this is the dominant sphere of influence of teaching cultures. The following questions guided the research:

What is the perception and prestige of research and teaching activities in the context of Learning and Teaching Strategy and changes to job roles? How does this fit with departmental, institutional, professional and disciplinary cultures and structures?

How do gender, ethnicity, age and other characteristics influence careers and career planning, and how do these intra-act with networks and indicators of esteem?

What are staff perceptions of the value placed on these indicators of esteem by institutional, professional and disciplinary colleagues? And if staff perceive of any change in the relative prestige of teaching and research, what do they attribute this to?

## Methods

The project utilises concept map-mediated semi-structured interviews to capture multiple data artefacts. This approach draws on research on the prestige economy which has explored interdisciplinarity; leadership; academic motivation; reward and recognition; gender and promotion gaps; and credibility development of senior professional leaders. The research approach draws out 'pedagogical currency' metrics to support reward and recognition for high quality educational work. Interviews with staff capture how they experience the curriculum change process and what they value, their perceptions of what is valued in their departments, institutionally and in wider academic and professional communities and how these impact upon their career (Coate and Kandiko Howson 2016). This paper draws on two phases of data collection. The first drew on interviews with 10 academics at the beginning of the implementation phase of the curriculum review across a number of departments and Faculties. The second phase explores an in-depth analysis of one department, with a further 10 interviews with academic staff, teaching fellows and PhD students with teaching responsibilities.

Within this approach, trends and differences are explored across individual characteristics such as age, institutional tenure and contract status (e.g. academic, research, teaching or education support-focused). The project runs alongside the curriculum change process, capturing staff perceptions at various stages. Interview data is triangulated with the programme-level approach to the curriculum change renewal process, drawing on discourse analysis of documentation of the process as well as programme-level and institutional-level evaluation indicators. Together this data provides a 'snapshot' of how departments are adapting to the curriculum change process. Analysis across job roles and career stage provides insight into how the curriculum change process is differentially affects staff. This highlights academic identity and shared and competing motivations in relation to job role, disciplinary, professional, institutional and external national and international

communities.

This research, in the context of large-scale policy and institutional change, highlights perceptions of the role of prestige in relation to research and teaching, sense of empowerment towards change, hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors on academic identities and motivation.

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