

Prestige in universities: in tension with the efficiency and effectiveness agenda? (0115)

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The role of prestige in organizational life has been explored in a number of projects in recent years. Prestige is seen as a form of high esteem accorded as a result of association with a number of forms of capital, which may be economic, social, cultural or symbolic (Bourdieu, 1984; 1988). Prestige stands beyond reputation and is characterised by: being measured relative to others rather than absolutely; tending to be defined by insider desires, often faculty, rather than by external stakeholders; growing and depreciating relatively slowly; and being a quality that only a few can possess rather than many or all (Brewer, Gates and Goldman, 2002). A forthcoming publication notes that for a range of sociological and psychological reasons prestige is a component of organisational life that can be both beneficial and negative in its effect, promoting excellence but also leading to excluding practices and inequity.

Two recent "Diamond" reports by the UUK Efficiency Group (2011; 2015) have aimed to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of universities. A recently completed project, funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, sought to explore the role of prestige as a driver in UK universities, through extended individual interviews with twenty heads of UK higher education institutions. Interviewees offered their perceptions of the role that prestige plays in their working lives, within their own career and in working within and beyond their institution.

A major purpose of the work was to identify tensions between the concept and operation of prestige in universities and the ambitions of the Diamond group to improve universities' efficiency and effectiveness. This paper focuses on that specific issue. The research asked:

- Is the seeking of prestige in tension with conventional accounting and the drive for collaboration? Are some university ambitions not compatible with the Diamond approach?
- Are there two parallel cultures in universities, one likely to be responsive to the Diamond reports' aims and the other resistant?
- Are there different challenges for pre- and post-1992 institutions?

It was found that the related concepts of prestige and reputation could be distinguished from each other and could be used as a way of exploring organisational behaviour. Whilst a distinction drawn between pre- and post-1992 institutions is relatively crude and can mask similarities, it was sometimes useful in analysing responses. The concept of prestige is readily appreciated in pre-1992 institutions, as providing a useful perspective on many attitudes and behaviours. Many felt that the management of prestige is an important feature of the work of most heads of institution. In post-1992 institutions, it is more common to believe that some parts only of an institution could aspire to be prestigious, and that reputation is a more relevant word to describe their level of aspiration. In such cases, managing potential tensions between prestige- and reputation-generating activities is part of the head of institution's role.

Prestige was found to present a challenge to conventional notions of efficiency and effectiveness. By definition, much that is prestigious cannot be given a precise financial valuation. Prestige may even be implicit and unspoken. For example, an iconic building may be expensive, but may have symbolic value. Making lectures available at no cost online can be a form of costly signalling, the very expense of which provides a prestige benefit.

Prestige may be a very strong driver for competitiveness, in tension with the collaboration that is at times needed to achieve efficiency. The Diamond reports face in two directions. Universities are called on to be competitive; they should also collaborate, to save public money. The Diamond reports' call for universities to collaborate with one another and with outside bodies, including the private sector, is at odds with institutions' desires to be distinctive. Heads of institutions also noted the tendency for university alliances to be politically strategic and aspirational.

The Diamond reports' emphasis on recognition and reward through contribution pay and other means understates the effect of non-pay aspects in human motivation at work. Attention to prestige may help to identify non-pay motivators to address the difficulties in recruitment of key academic staff internationally, noted in the second Diamond report.

A sharpening of competition to be prestigious is accompanied by more public measures by which institutions are judged, leading both to performativity and to evaluation of institutions by measures that are not appropriate for them. Heads of institutions referred both to their institution's tendency to be highly selective in the use of league tables and, for some, to staff who were discouraged by their institution's lack of success in global league tables that were not appropriate to them.

The Diamond reports' concern for efficiency and effectiveness presumes that universities exist to satisfy their external stakeholders. However, heads of institution reported their experiences in dealing with internal stakeholders. Academic tribalism remained a feature of academic life, revealed in attitudes and behaviours. However, some differences were between academic and professional areas. Perceptions of relative prestige could inhibit many desired activities.

Prestige takes time to acquire and is often associated with stability, and so is in tension with requirements for rapid change. Some heads of research-intensive institutions took the view that being disinclined to change could signal strength. Self-confidence in pursuing one's own mission was part of the role of the head of institution.

The outcomes of the research project suggest that the concepts of prestige and reputation can usefully be distinguished from each other in practice. Prestige drives much behaviour in universities strongly, making conventional approaches to defining efficiency and effectiveness highly problematic. Therefore it offers a powerful way of understanding some of the nuances of organisational behaviour.

References

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