

Final Report for SRHE Newer Researcher's Prize 2011

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

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1. Executive summary

This 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. Academic motivation and national and institutional reward schemes were explored in England, the US, Ireland and Iceland. An anthropological term “prestige economy” was defined and located as part of a three-part model, and its application to higher education was explored through interviews, using a socio-cultural approach rooted in Bourdieu’s analyses of academic life. This was used to analyse the impact on academic roles, including teaching research and service. National frameworks have a strong impact on academic work, and such frameworks can help, or hinder, institutional aims and goals. The project:

- Examined patterns of motivation in a number of academic settings
- Analysed academic identity and shared and competing motivations in relation to disciplinary, institutional and external national and international communities
- Drew conclusions in an international comparative context about perceptions of the role of prestige in relation to national policies, local hiring and promotion policies, and disciplinary factors on academic identities and motivation

Discipline and field of study-related prestige factors, such as being invited for keynote speeches and advancing ideas in the field, positively motivated academics. Institutional and national reward and recognition frameworks were seen to concentrate on research and subsequently devalue teaching and service activities. Academics often described ‘playing the game’ and ‘jumping through hoops’ to get ahead, and many senior academics described having more freedom and flexibility to pursue their own interests and career paths. Tenure and institutional hierarchy drove prestige in the US. The RAE and REF schemes dominated prestige discussions in England, along with institutional mission group ranking. The economic crises in the cases of Ireland and Iceland showed the significant role that the monetary economy plays in academia through a points system in Iceland linked to direct pay and challenges of hiring, pay and promotion freezes and short term contracts in Ireland. Many academics were ambivalent about the term ‘prestige’ and preferred to focus on their passion for their subject, and developing and disseminating new knowledge.

2. Summary of project aims and objectives

Work on the academic prestige economy developed in the context of motivation in academia, particularly why some academics pursued certain types of activities, such as interdisciplinary work, and others did not. In investigating motivation, it was noted that many academic activities are not financially advantageous, such as reviewing journal articles and research grant applications (Lamont, 2009). However, these activities are often recognised and rewarded in non-financial ways. At times of budgetary cutbacks, increasing workloads and associated stress, an understanding of academic motivation seems vital.

To explore academic motivation and reward schemes, a model was developed considering different ‘overlapping’ and ‘associated’ economies. This included the term ‘prestige economy’, an anthropological term describing organised patterns of exchange which stand outside a conventional financial economy, but are related to it (Bascom 1948; English, 2005; Grinev 2005; Herskovits 1948). A model of the academic prestige economy has been used to examine the influence of national context on prestige across the UK, Ireland, Iceland and the US. This study builds on two previous projects, which signalled how motivation was influenced by hiring and promotion policies, across disciplinary, institutional and national contexts. This highlighted the importance of perceived career pathways and reward schemes in academics’ motivation.

The investigation of academic motivation and perceptions of the role of prestige factors—those that carry honour, respect and standing—explores to what extent the prestige economy concept factors in academics’ conception of identity and role in their departmental, institutional and disciplinary context. Using this framework, and taking a social practice theory approach to academic motivation moves beyond conventional accounts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and looks to find ways of capturing the social aspects of motivation that are associated with the disciplinary and professional groups within which academics are located.

A key aspect of prestige is the accumulation, and transaction, of indicators of esteem. These can be official, such as title, academic rank and salary; honorary, for example fellowships and keynote speeches; and informal. The latter are often socially-based, and often are ‘traded’ and ‘exchanged’ for more formalised rewards (and *vice versa*). There is inherent overlap in such indicators, for example being appointed to chair a committee may be prestigious but also involves work, and supervising a barrage of doctoral students is time-intensive but is also highly regarded.

3. Outline of methodology and project timetable

This small-scale study explored the prestige economy concept in academics’ conception of role and identity in different national contexts. Although not representative of national context, this project looked 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 and national context. Interviews

were done with academics 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).

Month	Activity
1-3 (November-December 2011)	Literature review Identification of suitable cases in each country
4-7 (November 2011 through May 2012)	In-depth study through interviews in three different countries, focus groups and documentary analysis. Comparisons with previously collected data from the UK
8-10 (June 2012-August 2012)	Analysis and writing reports Begin journal article writing Report and materials preparation
11-12 (September 2012-present)	Conference and presentations Report and material completed and delivered Journal article submission for peer review

4. Analysis of results

Data was analysed using NVivo software, which through deep coding allows for themes to be recorded and emerging themes to be identified. Data was analysed by three layers. First was the departmental level, focusing on major themes, with reports being made back to each participating department. Second is each national context, which also feeds into the summary departmental reports. The third level was an international comparative analysis, comparing the structures, motivation and application of the prestige economy notion and the role of national context.

Major themes emerged around levels and locations of prestige in the previous work done in England. Making national-level comparisons, the RAE/REF scheme dominated the prestige discussion in the UK, directing academics to particular research outputs and targets and supporting institutional stratification. The interviews conducted in America drew to attention the notion of 'networks' of prestige, and the importance of national and regional institutional hierarchies. 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, 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 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. The lack of national frameworks did not impede the pressures academics faced to produce ‘prestigious’ research, and tensions were high due to increasing use of short-term contracts. The cases of Ireland and Iceland, in different ways, both showed the significant role that the monetary economy plays in academic motivation.

Across all of the countries, the main drivers of motivation were curiosity and a passion for the subject. Across all countries, academics felt that teaching was undervalued, associated with less prestige, but was often a highly motivating aspect of academic work. Institutional and national review and reward frameworks were often described as ‘games to be played’, such as pursuing unnecessary research grants just to bring money and prestige in to the department. Academics often followed ‘new rules of the game’ but were drained and de-motivated by them. There was noted frustration when the ‘goal posts shifted’ and the criteria were subjective; in fields including Tourism, Education and Humanities, research was seen as being rewarded and valued, in contrast to work with students and community stakeholders. National pressures were seen to be part of the disintegration of traditional tripartite academic roles. However, several academics commented that they felt that they were privileged to be able to work in academia.

5. Project outcomes

- A better understanding of academic motivation, leading to the possibility of more effective leadership and management at a variety of levels
- A more developed understanding of what a “prestige economy” looks like and how it works across national boundaries
- A comparative framework for researching academic motivation and a comparative analysis of prestige economies
- Recommendations and strategies for leaders and policy-makers for strategically managing competing motivations in academic life, such as those at departmental, institutional, national and disciplinary levels
- Bringing an international comparative perspective to previous UK-based research, highlighting issues for international academics, audiences, research and policy
- Using international comparisons as examples of consequences for policy-making at national levels

6. Summary of next steps planned

Recent presentations at the SRHE 2012 Conference were well-attended and positively received. There are two major next steps. First is writing summary reports for participating departments. The second is drafting articles for journal submission. One is planned on the major findings from the project, and a second co-authored piece on prestige and gender.

6.1 Presentation of work

Kandiko, C. B. (2012). Why work in academia? A comparative analysis of motivation and prestige factors of academics in different national contexts. Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Conference 2012, 12-14 December, Celtic Manor, Newport, South Wales.

Kandiko, C. B. (2012). Why work in academia? A comparative analysis of motivation and prestige factors of academics in different national contexts. Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Newer Researcher's Conference 2012, 11 December, Celtic Manor, Newport, South Wales.

Kandiko, C. B. (2012). Why work in a university? An international study on academic motivation. Invited talk for the Teaching Center, 4 May, University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands).

Blackmore P. & Kandiko, C. B. (2012). Prestige Economy: Motivation in Academic Life. Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES) Seminar Series Invited Lecture. 6 March 2012. Institute of Education, London.

6.2 Publication of work

In progress: Coate, K. And Kandiko, C. B. (in progress). Indicators of Esteem: Gender and Prestige in Academic Work. Submission planned for *Gender and Society*.

In development: A paper summarising the main findings of the project, planned for an SRHE-affiliated journal.

A conceptual paper on the framework for the project has been accepted and is available:

Blackmore, P. & Kandiko, C. B. (2011). Motivation in academic life: A prestige economy. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 16(4), 399-411.

A practice article on the foundation research was also published:

Blackmore, P. & Kandiko, C. B. (2011). Motivating academics: The role of prestige. *Engage: The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education*, 26, 13.

6.3 Any plans to continue with the work or proposals for further research which might compliment this project.

In discussions with a gender and prestige-related bid proposal for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Further outcomes

A presentation was also given during one of the site visits on a different research area:

Kandiko, C. B. (2012). Challenges in Cross-Cultural PhD Supervision: Mapping to Facilitate Dialogue. Invited talk for the Conversations on Teaching and Learning Seminar, 8 March, Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway.

Through networking during one of the visits, a paper was submitted on a related topic, the role of leadership and creativity (and academics motivations to pursue creative and interdisciplinary work). It will be coming out in a forthcoming issue:

Kandiko, C. B. (2013). Leadership and creativity in Higher Education: The role of interdisciplinarity. *London Review of Education, Special Issue on Creativity*

References

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Grinev, A. V. (2005). *The Tlingit Indians in Russian America, 1741–1867*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.

Herskovits, M. J. (1948). *Man and his Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

Lamont, M. (2009). *How professors think: Inside the curious world of academic judgement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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