

ACADEMIC MOTIVATION: EXPLORING PRESTIGE ECONOMIES

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Introduction

Universities are under pressure to be more productive than ever before; this is a worldwide trend. At the same time, the range of activities that universities undertake is now much broader. In particular there has been major growth in 'third stream' or applied research activity, alongside the more traditional fields of teaching and research. Performance is therefore a concern in higher education. Many universities in the UK introduced performance-related pay, particularly under the Rewarding and Developing Staff initiative, in which, over a five-year period, over £800 million was allocated to higher education institutions to enable them to modernise their human resources practices. There has been some scepticism about the effectiveness of this initiative (Guest and Clinton 2007). It is clear that unless academic motivation is better understood the efforts of leaders and managers will often be frustrated, leading to a waste of scarce resources and an unengaged staff.

An alternative idea – that of a 'prestige economy' – has now been presented on many occasions, at conferences, seminars and within accredited teaching programmes. It has been met each time with a high level of interest. We have strong positive feedback that this is an idea which helps to explain academic behaviour. As such, it may permit universities in search of improved productivity to arrive at a better solution than performance-related pay.

In this article, we outline work undertaken with a grant from the Leadership Foundation's Small Development Projects scheme. Our aim was to examine the prestige economy in a number of academic departments and research centres, with a view to highlighting how a greater understanding of academic motivation may benefit those in leadership and professional development roles.

The project: aims and objectives

The project aimed to develop greater understanding of academic motivation, benefiting those in leadership positions and in development roles in higher education.

Our proposed outcomes were:

- | A better understanding of academic motivation, leading to the possibility of more effective leadership and management;
- | A more developed understanding of what a 'prestige economy' looks like and how it works;
- | Development communities that are better equipped to understand academic motivation and thus to facilitate change.

We believe there is a wide need for the outcomes and outputs of our work to be shared with:

- | Human resources, staff and educational developers and other specialists who work across institutions;
- | Academic leaders in boundary-spanning roles, who are seeking to bring together staff in different faculties or departments. These might include incoming pro-vice-chancellors, deans and leaders of cross-institutional academic initiatives;
- | Those who are involved in departmental reorganisation, especially merger.

Developing the concept of a prestige economy

Performance-related pay is built on the assumption that staff are motivated by money. Tasks are set, the accomplishment of which trigger an additional payment. However, many academic tasks are either poorly paid or not paid at all. External examining is an excellent example. The allowance given for the work does not usually reflect either the level of responsibility of the role or the time that has to be spent on it. Another example would be delivering a keynote speech – an accolade, but one that is often unpaid. Journal article reviewing and committee work are, typically, unpaid. Yet academic staff more or less willingly engage in these tasks. It seems therefore that there are other motivators at work. This is not to say that money is unrelated to these tasks. Clearly each of them contributes to an academic profile, the strength of which in due time might support a case for promotion, but money is not the sole motivator.

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There is a large literature on motivation, which generally divides the field into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Professional development for leaders and managers often deals with supporting groups of colleagues to be innovative and to change their working practices. Terms such as 'herding cats' are testimony to the challenging nature of achieving change in academic settings. Previous work by the authors highlighted the central importance of a local culture in determining how likely an innovation was to succeed. Leaders and managers could not make progress if a change was not "the way we do things here". We started to use the term 'prestige economy' (Bascom 1948, Herskovits 1948, English 2005) to describe the collection of beliefs and values and ways of working that characterise and express what a particular group of people prizes highly.

Project methodology

We examined five settings, a range of academic departments and research centres representing humanities, social sciences and sciences and cross-disciplinary activities, reflecting both academic and professional orientations. In our selection of participants we worked with staff at a range of levels of experience and grade. Within a small project we cannot expect to achieve a full representation of the range of higher education settings but were able to illustrate the range of situations and the different ways in which staff may be motivated.

We used four sources of information:

- Short, focused, semi-structured interviews with a small sample of key staff, particularly those in 'boundary-spanning' roles (Hoe 2006), focusing on individual career trajectories, recorded and transcribed;
- Focus groups with a range of staff, exploring shared understandings of departmental values and practices;
- Document analysis including the ways in which departments are represented in print and on the web;
- Statistical information, over such matters as patterns of promotion.

Taken together these offered a concise way of 'taking the pulse' of the department, triangulating findings through a range of sources of information. We particularly examined motivation with a range of staff, from junior staff to senior managers and academics as well as administrators. We are not claiming that academic work is entirely unique but we do believe that an academic environment introduces particular features, one of which is the influence of the discipline or professional group. Since most academic staff are reported to feel more of an affiliation to their discipline than to their institution (Jenkins 1996), there are complex motivations for academics. We do not believe academics' behaviour can be explained without looking at these various features of academic organisation and motivation.

Exploring the meaning of a prestige economy

The term 'economy' has both Latin and Greek roots, and refers to household management. It tends now to mean a social system in which goods and services are produced, exchanged and consumed. 'Prestige' has Latin roots; *Præstigium* means a delusion or a trick. Prestige generally refers to the regard for and/or value placed on an achievement,

possession or personal attribute by a community. The Latin origin is significant because the term conveys ambivalence. We may not always like to admit that we are moved by ideas of prestige. This raises interesting problems for the researcher, if some actions are influenced by ideas of prestige that it may not be comfortable for those involved to voice. The term 'prestige economy' was used first by anthropologists (Bascom 1948, Herskovits 1948, Grinev 2005) who were studying cultures in which many transactional actions could not be explained in monetary terms. Other rewards were in play – for example, often the act of making a gift could confer prestige on the giver. The term has not previously been used in the context of higher education, even though the idea of prestige seems relevant to an academic situation where the aim is to produce excellent research that is recognised as such by an academic community. Teaching also has associated prestige, currently being played out through the ways in which National Student Survey league tables pit one institution against another in terms of the quality of student experience.

The role of the department and discipline

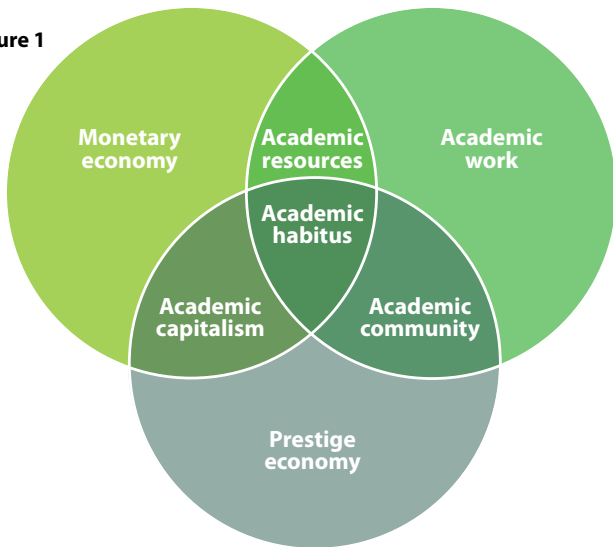
A distinctive feature of academic life is that the academic aspect of institutions continues largely to be organised around disciplines. That is of course a simplification. Many of the most live areas in universities are inherently interdisciplinary – bioinformatics being one example. Much teaching and a certain amount of research is now organised in ways that try to break down disciplinary silos. Nevertheless the discipline and the department remain highly significant.

The discipline is the heart of what is taught and researched. To be credible, a member of academic staff has to belong within the discipline, and must use the conventions of the discipline in order to have a voice. Promotion is still largely on the basis of research excellence, the achievement of which requires the member of academic staff to convince his or her community of colleagues. Although disciplines may be under attack by the speed of epistemological change and fragmentation, they remain highly significant. Previous research showed that the strength of disciplinary identity could make it difficult to persuade staff to engage in interdisciplinary work. Many were not willing to cross disciplinary boundaries and thus risk their careers (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011). Yet the growth of what has been called 'academic capitalism' requires that boundaries are crossed and new connections made between areas of knowledge.

A model of academic motivation

The project made use of a model of academic motivation (see figure 1) that was developed through a previous Leadership Foundation supported project reported in issue 19 of ENGAGE (Blackmore and Kandiko 2009). The model represents intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the desire for knowledge that first brought the member of academic staff into research and teaching, noted as 'academic work'. Extrinsic motivation is represented by the 'monetary economy'. The idea of a prestige economy is also included, representing the department or discipline.

Figure 1



Using the ideas of Bourdieu (1988), we can see that these economies deal with different kinds of capital. A discipline tends to make use of cultural capital and social capital. The first of these refers to artefacts, such as books and articles, but also exhibitions and conferences. The institution and the department support these activities through providing 'academic resources'. Social capital refers to connections among people. At the centre of the diagram is the individual, residing in their 'academic habitus'.

There are two areas of particular interest. Firstly, the intersection of learning and the prestige economy occurs when an individual academic joins a disciplinary community. This confers status and permissions, but it also imposes a set of obligations, many of them implicit. This area has been labelled one of 'academic community'. Although the term 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) has been used extensively in exploration of academic life, it could be argued that academic work is inherently competitive. So the relationship between the individual and the department is one of tensions.

Secondly there is an intersection between the department and the outside world from which, increasingly, must come resources to support academic work. This is the area known as 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004) and is also an area of tension. For some disciplines and for some individuals, boundary-crossing is easy. For others it is not comfortable. This is of course highly relevant in an institution that is trying to increase its applied research activities. In both of these contexts the department is likely to be highly significant in influencing academic behaviour. The model in figure 1 was used during the interviews to explore notions and conceptions of prestige, with particular discussion amongst the areas of academic capitalism and the relation of the monetary economy and academic life.

Some findings

Prestige can be analysed at various levels in academic life. This study explored notions of prestige at the individual, departmental and institutional levels. However, further related aspects of prestige emerged during the study that drew attention to various disciplinary, interdisciplinary, international and external (societal) arenas.

Across disciplinary fields of study, motivation in academic life is largely driven by intellectual stimulation. Junior faculty in particular noted that academia is a hard field in which to succeed, and one has to be very motivated to enter it and continue in it. One needs the internal motivation for learning about the subject to carry on despite the rejections that are an inevitable part of academia. Internal motivation is essential, as academics at a variety of levels noted that there is no great personal wealth to be made in higher education, especially in comparison to other professional fields.

Prestige-seeking and prestige-granting activities varied across the departments and disciplines studied, with differences seen in the relationship of the department to the external world – whether it was contracting clients for research, scientific development, or undergraduate student recruitment. There were also differences in approaches to prestige among academics within the same department. This highlights issues for leadership and management at all levels. For senior leaders, there are opportunities to be strategic in the way individual and group prestige-seeking can enhance institutional prestige and align with the institutional vision and goals. At the level of head of school/college, there are key differences in the ways departments and disciplines seek and gain prestige and the way this impacts on broader goals. For heads of department there are important implications for the way in which roles and duties are delegated within the department.

Institutional prestige was seen as far removed from academics' daily lives; there was a lack of connection to 'those at the top'. Institutional leaders were seen often to have to defer to the judgements of those with expertise at the local level, particularly regarding research quality. Overall there was a sense that legitimacy and respect comes from peers in discipline and department, with the 'institutional' perspective representing the views of 'administration' and 'management'.

Academics noted a lack of leadership training in universities, and the challenge of being promoted for research and then moved into a leadership role. Those in leadership positions noted the importance of the notion of 'relative prestiges' (the fact that many different types of roles can carry prestige, not just 'star' researchers), and that the success of a department is based on a number of different activities. Leaders also discussed the need to support staff but also to challenge them to seek more and 'better' markers of prestige. This is an interesting aspect which suggests there might be benefit in follow-up work in individual departments to explore what prestige looks like, in relation to teaching or research or some other academic activities, rather than assuming a tacit, shared understanding free of tensions.

Many academics see prestige as self-serving, and often not aligned with departmental or institutional priorities. This can lead to discord in departments, where those who seem to seek or attain prestige are not seen as team players in the department. This has also led to some academics turning down opportunities or leadership roles because it did not seem part of the 'academic ethos'.

The project emphasised that the range of roles supporting academic work is wider than ever before. There is a growing body of 'blended professionals' (Whitchurch 2007) who are often undertaking academic work from a nonacademic position, and whose boundary-spanning role is particularly vital in managing the border between the institution and the department.

Significance of the project

In a climate in which universities are being urged to deliver an increasing number of complex outputs there is a clear trend towards more a more direct management approach, which is more centrally driven and has been described as 'managerialism' (Deem et al, 2007). However, it could be argued that issuing instructions increasingly loudly from the centre may not produce results in an organisation that is strongly socialised into disciplinary communities.

Some obvious conclusions suggest themselves. Firstly, ignoring prestige factors will not make them go away. A change initiative that does not take account of local motivators is not likely to succeed. Secondly, money is not the prime motivator in academic life. Many interviewees pointed out that they could earn more elsewhere if they wished. Thirdly, a motivational climate – a prestige economy – contains a complex combination of factors. Finally, the importance of motivating factors embedded locally suggests that change is likely to be best led from within a department if possible.

There are also messages for those who work to enhance university productivity. The steer that is given by arrangements for probation and promotion is likely to be highly significant in signalling what it is that is valued by an institution. Recent trends towards more local treatment of educational development for teaching and learning, with the growth of discipline-related provision, seems to be heading in the right direction, particularly if there is a strong sense of ownership within the department. Estates can have a major role in providing an environment where disciplines can be encouraged to meet and mingle or else retain their separateness. Heads of departments are likely to be highly aware, on an informal level, of what motivates the staff in their department. However, they may not have thought strategically about ways in which a prestige economy can be viewed and managed. This may be a useful focus for leadership development support.

Conclusion

This project is highly relevant to a great deal of the Leadership Foundation's research agenda. It is a key aspect of any leadership role in higher education that requires engagement with academic communities, and it has the potential to have a considerable impact on the effectiveness of leadership development. There are obvious benefits for the whole sector, for this work goes to the heart of one of the most long-running and widely felt concerns among development communities of all kinds in universities – the problem of 'engagement' (Elvidge 2004, 2006). Persuading academic staff, individually and in groups, to make use of the development support that is available to them is a continuing issue. Some suggest that this comes about because developers may not properly understand the cultures with which they work, and may seek to impose their own (McWilliam 2002). Helping development communities to find their way into academic groupings would be immensely useful and could lead to the more effective use of development resources.

We are immensely grateful to the Leadership Foundation for the support they have offered to the project. We believe the idea of a prestige economy makes a valuable continuation to the ways we think about achieving change, in higher education and elsewhere. **E**

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Project outputs

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