Motivation and academic staff in higher education

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Abstract
Seeks to identify issues that impact on the motivation of academic staff in higher education. Argues that the rational-economic model, the social model, the self-actualizing model and the complex models of motivation provide a basis for analysing staff motivation as a central issue in evolving quality cultures. Discusses environmental factors that impact on motivation which include approaches to financial rewards, the culture of teaching and higher education; the diversity of staff experience and roles, personal autonomy, and organizational structure.

Introduction
The staff of a higher education institution are a key resource. Academic staff, in particular, account for a significant component of the budget of higher education institutions and have a major role to play in achieving the objectives of the institution. The performance of academic staff, both as teachers and researchers and also as managers, determines, to a large extent, the quality of the student experience of higher education and has a significant impact on student learning and thereby on the contribution that such institutions can make to society.

Most higher education institutions have an implicit or explicit mission to offer a high quality learning experience to all their students. Academic staff manage this learning experience and are the main interface with students. Consequently, their motivation is crucial in determining the quality of this interface. In addition, research is important both in revitalizing staff interest in their subject and in keeping their enthusiasm alive, and in building a research and publishing profile for the institution. Exceptionally well motivated academic staff can, with appropriate support, build a national and international reputation for themselves and the institution in the research, publishing and professional areas. Such a profile may have a significant impact on the ability of the institution to attract high calibre students, research funds and consultancy contracts. However, such achievements depend on an exceptionally high level of commitment.

Motivation, then, is key in the establishment and further development of quality in higher education. This article explores some of the tensions associated with motivation of teaching staff in higher education. It argues that formal reward systems are only one tool which may be used by the effective manager. The effective manager needs to recognize that different motivators are appropriate for different staff and that different staff will demonstrate differing inherent levels of motivation in setting their own targets and striving towards them. Good management consists of recognizing and working with those individual differences. Since many teaching staff in higher education are inherently well motivated and work in an environment where the development of professional skills and subject knowledge is the accepted norm, an
important component of the manager's role is in minimizing dissatisfiers. After exploring the relationship between quality, culture and motivation, the article reviews some traditional models of motivation. Despite their longevity these models still offer a useful framework for the consideration of motivation.

Quality, culture and motivation

Quality, and in particular quality assessment and assurance procedures, have received much attention in higher education in the United Kingdom in recent years. “Quality of education” has been described as:

The success with which an institution provides educational environments which enable students effectively to achieve worthwhile learning goals including appropriate academic standards (Gordon and Partington, 1993).

Clearly, the student/lecturer interface is important in determining quality and it is appropriate to seek to monitor this quality through appropriate quality assurance processes. However, this is a very superficial approach. The real challenge is the enhancement of quality. Different institutions have started to investigate approaches to quality enhancement. For example, Hart and Shoolbred (1993) cite Wolverhampton University as seeking registration under BS 5750 and a number of other universities as taking the TQM path, including Aston, South Bank, Robert Gordon’s and Wolverhampton. Other contributions which describe initiatives in this area include Marchese (1991), Ewell (1991) and Cornesky (1991). A paper by the Further Education Unit (1991) offers six criteria for a quality model:

1. It seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning strategies.
2. It is flexible.
3. It harnesses the commitment of all staff.
4. The learner should be involved.
5. There must be enhanced working relationships in all functions of the organization.
6. Requirements can be measured and the progress can be demonstrated.

This model indicates the central role of “commitment” or motivation in quality models. It also recognizes the importance of treating quality as an organization-wide issue which covers all functions. Hart and Shoolbred (1993) also seek to emphasize the relationship between quality and culture:

A quality management system ... is after all concerned with how people behave and this behaviour is made manifest in an organisation’s climate and culture.

They conclude:

If further and higher education institutions are going to make serious moves towards effective quality assurance ... they need to be aware how much the culture may have to change. This may be highly uncomfortable, for senior management and for the workforce.

In the context of their central theme of culture and cultural change, they start to explore some of the mechanisms for harnessing commitment. This article seeks to make a more thorough analysis of motivation for academic staff. Admittedly this is only one element of culture and focuses only on one group of workers. But the issues for this group are sufficiently significant for an analysis to be appropriate. Further work on the cultures and sub-cultures in a higher education institution would also provide a more effective backdrop.

Some models of motivation

There are four well-established models of motivation:

1. the rational-economic;
2. the social;
3. the self-actualizing; and
4. the complex models.

The first three of these can be regarded as content models of motivation. Content theories of motivation try to explain the factors within a person which motivate them. Although these models were first introduced some 40 to 50 years ago they are still a useful framework. The complex model introduces some aspects of the process theory of motivation. Each of these is described briefly, as a basis for later discussion.

The rational-economic model

This suggests that people are motivated primarily by economic self-interest, and will act to maximize their own financial and material rewards (e.g. Taylor, 1947). People’s motivation then can be controlled largely by offering or withholding financial rewards. Underlying this model are the assumptions that people are passive, are inclined to assert less rather than more effort, are unwilling to take...
responsibility, and are interested in work for what they can get out of it financially.

**The social model**

This can be summarized in the following terms (e.g. Mayo, 1975):

1. People at work are motivated primarily by social needs, such as the need for friendship and acceptance, and their sense of identity is formed through relationships with other people.
2. As a result of increased mechanization and rationalization, work has lost some of its meaning, and people increasingly seek meaning in social relationships at work.
3. People are more responsive to the pressures of their peer groups at work than to management controls and incentives.
4. People respond when management meets their needs for belonging, acceptance and sense of identity.

**The self-actualizing model**

Maslow (e.g. Maslow, 1970) first developed the idea of self-actualization needs. According to Maslow, self-actualization is the need a person has to fulfil his or her capabilities and potential, that is, his or her desire for growth. The model further indicates that the following motivate people:

- Human needs fall into a hierarchy from the most basic physiological needs to needs for self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). As the basic needs are met, energy is released for the satisfaction of higher needs. Everyone seeks a sense of meaning and accomplishment in their work (see Figure 1).
- Individuals like to exercise autonomy and independence and to develop skills.

**Figure 1** Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

- People are primarily self-motivated and self-controlled.
- There is no inherent conflict between self-actualization and more effective organizational performance. People are happy to integrate their goals with those of the organization.

Hertzberg conducted a study of accountants and engineers. Hertzberg et al. (1959) asked respondents what made them feel good particularly (satisfiers) and bad (dissatisfiers) about their jobs. Satisfiers or motivators were closely related to self-actualization needs. Motivators include the work itself, recognition, advancement and responsibility. Motivators are intrinsic factors directly related to the job and largely internal to the individual. Dissatisfiers or hygiene factors relate to Maslow’s lower level needs. These include company policy and administration, superannuation, salary, working conditions and interpersonal relations. Hygienes are extrinsic factors, which the organization largely determines.

Improvement in these dissatisfiers would remove dissatisfaction, but would not elicit positive motivation. Positive motivation comes only from accomplishing a meaningful and challenging task.

Hertzberg’s study is recognized to have some limitations. In particular, results for professional workers may not be applicable to all groups. In addition, he uses satisfaction and motivation as interchangeable, and there is an embedded assumption that increased satisfaction leads to increased motivation and this is not always the case. Nevertheless, the distinction between satisfiers and dissatisfiers is useful, and the recognition that some factors contribute to positive motivation while others can only minimize dissatisfaction is important.

**The complex model**

Schein (1980) argues that the problem with each of the preceding models of human behaviour is their claim to universality and generality. Schein, instead, sees human nature as complex, with human needs and motivations varying according to the different circumstances people face, their life experience, expectations and age. People are motivated to work when they believe that they can get what they want from their jobs. T his might include the satisfaction of safety needs, the excitement
of doing challenging work, or the ability to set and achieve goals. Schein emphasizes that those with responsibility for managing people need to be sensitive to people's differing circumstances and different cultural backgrounds and that strategies for motivating staff need to accommodate this diversity.

Schein also introduces the concept of a psychological contract. This contract is essentially a set of expectations on both sides and a match is important if efforts to improve motivation are likely to be effective. This model suggests a process of enquiry and negotiation, where each side makes their expectations explicit, and some kind of workable agreement is reached. The manager also needs to recognize that people are not fully aware of their expectations or most find it difficult to express them, so the manager needs to be sensitive and open to signs.

Academic staff - environment and culture

This section seeks to draw on some of the concepts introduced in the last section in explaining cultural and environmental factors which impinge on motivation in higher education. Important aspects of the environment which impinge on the management of motivation include the following.

Financial rewards

Academic staff are appointed to a single salary scale. Their position on that scale is determined by their qualifications and experience, and possibly previous salary, at the time of their appointment. Progression through the scale is by annual increments. In some institutions additional increments may be awarded for special achievements, but in others there is no such scheme. In some subject areas, notably the professional disciplines, it is possible for staff to earn additional income by participation in external, income-generating activities, but arrangements surrounding these opportunities vary between institutions. Promotion is relatively rare, and may reward many years' work. In this environment, financial reward is remote from day to day experience, and other sources of motivation are important. On the other hand some new staff are on a very low point on the salary scale and this can act as a dissatisfier, particularly if they have entered a lecturing post after employ-
concerned chiefly with the line management of academic staff, usually through heads of department, although clearly the line management of the head of department will determine their level of motivation and this will impact on the effectiveness with which they motivate staff. Most academic staff are grouped either within departments which often contain 30-50 staff, or into smaller schools of say 15-20 staff. In both instances the span of control is wide and it is certainly a challenge for the line manager to maintain effective motivation via personal interaction with all staff.

**Strategies for motivation**

In an environment where there is already a strong development of a culture, strategies which support self-actualization and growth are strong contenders. These include the following.

**Appraisal and development schemes**

These schemes which offer the opportunity for staff to explore their development needs with their line manager. Interviews held as part of this process can be an important area for developing the psychological contract.

**Opportunities for personal development**

Opportunities for personal development include:

- experience in teaching different groups of students;
- visiting students on work placement;
- research and publishing activities;
- consultancy;
- study for higher degrees;
- attendance at conferences and workshops;
- management/team leadership experience;
- training in teaching and/or management skills.

**Managing dissatisfiers**

The manager has a significant role in eliminating or reducing dissatisfiers. His is often achieved through negotiation and allocation of resources. His must clearly be achieved within organizational constraints, and where it is not possible to modify the dissatisfiers, managers should seek to eliminate their effects and communicate the constraints. For example, currently all funding to higher education institutions (for teaching) is based on student numbers. Most institutions, therefore, allocate staffing resources on this basis. Staff need to appreciate that staffing resources in specific subject areas are determined by such criteria and not by the number of teaching or contact hours, as was to some extent the case in the polytechnic sector in the past. Communication is necessary to ensure that staff expectations change with the changes in the environment.

**The financial dimension**

The usual strategies for financial motivation are performance-related pay and promotion. Such strategies are not usually within the control of the individual head of department or line manager and will be controlled by institutional norms and funding council initiatives. As such, when the opportunity arises, these strategies can be used by the individual manager to encourage motivation, but their intermittent and uncontrollable nature presents a lot of problems.

**The social factor**

Many staff work in the same higher education institution for many years. It is particularly important that they are accepted as part of the social group or team. Most staff have an acute need to feel that their contribution is worthwhile, appreciated and acknowledged. My experience is that this need is particularly evident among those staff who realistically recognize they have no further worthwhile career aspirations, yet need reassurance that their existing skills are still valued in the ever-changing environment. This need to continue to contribute will be a major factor in these staff accommodating to change.

**Conclusions**

This article has sought to identify some of the issues which impact on the motivation of academic staff in higher education. It argues that such motivation is central to a quality culture. As higher education institutions become more sophisticated in their approach to quality and move on from the current emphasis on quality assurance to a stronger focus on quality enhancement, motivation will become an even more central issue.

Further survey-based research, which investigates the relative importance of a variety of factors on staff motivation, will offer additional insights, but will be no substitute for the development of psychological contracts between staff and their managers.
These contracts should accommodate the view that all staff have differing motivators and hygiene factors and levels of inherent motivation in relation to their job. Further work on the expectations of staff and their managers and the coincidence of these expectations would be beneficial.

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