

## Motivation: theory and use in Higher Education

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### Introduction

The range of literature on motivation is vast and, depending on whether one's professional discipline is, for example, Psychology, Bioscience, Education or Business, motivation will be represented in quite different ways. Therefore motivation may be represented as something internal:- a 'predisposition towards...', a 'need', a 'drive' or an 'instinct'. For others, motivation is inherent or 'emergent' in or from particular contexts – something external to the person or organism. For yet others, it is something both internal and external with, on occasion, some quantification involved – 'greater' or 'lesser' amounts (or degrees) of motivation. While a number of those perspectives will be touched upon here, the focus and emphasis will be on motivation in a Higher Education, student context. Here too, the concept of motivation may be seen to touch the edges of other constructs – constructs such as, 'self-efficacy', 'locus of control' and 'student engagement' for they all share similar cognitive, affective and behavioural roots.

### ***Some definitions and perspectives***

- Cherry (2010) views motivation as “the process that initiates, guides and maintains goal-oriented behaviours”.
- Brennen, (2006, p.4) believes motivation to be “... the level of effort an individual is willing to expend toward the achievement of a certain goal”
- Guay et al., (2010, p. 712) describes it simply as “reasons underlying behaviour”.

Ryan and Deci in their original research (1985), although not the first to talk about the multi-faceted nature of motivation more specifically about 'internal-external' dimensions, are the most well-known. This summary of those dimensions comes from a later paper:-

*The most basic distinction is between intrinsic motivation<sup>1</sup>, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome... (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p55)*

In that same paper, Ryan and Deci also introduce a quantitative dimension into the equation by suggesting that apart from any internal-external variation in the kind of motivation we may have.. *“people have ... different amounts [and] they vary... in level of motivation (i.e. how much motivation...” (p.54)*. So now motivation has both orientation and scope.

### ***Learning and Teaching Perspectives and Influences***

Lepper (1988) follows the lead of Ryan and Deci by discussing the concept of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in a student context:- a student who is intrinsically motivated undertakes an activity *“for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes”* and that an extrinsically motivated student performs *“in order to obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself... such as grades, stickers, or teacher approval.”*

Ericksen, (1978, p. 3) turns the spotlight on teachers by claiming that *“Effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher's ability... to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place”*, whilst educationist and educational psychologist Deborah Stipek (1988) also lays much importance on teacher effectiveness as the key factor that propels student motivation.

### **Into the substance**

We have seen that there are a variety of approaches to both motivation generally and the learning and teaching aspects of motivation, however, to tease out implications for practice will requires more specific reading of the literature.

The notion of intrinsic motivation is something that is of great interest to both business and educational psychologists since it it implies that there are already predispositions within an individual’s psychological make-up that may be triggered by particular influences (cf Lepper - op cit – above). A student`s intrinsic motivation, it is suggested (Ryan and Deci, 2000 *op cit*), can be initiated by either the individual`s natural self, the home or family setting, social or peer pressure and or a combination of two or all of the afore mentioned. An intrinsically motivated student will be very

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of ‘intrinsic motivation’ comes originally from the psychologist [Robert White \(1959\)](#) who described it as an element of what he called ‘competence’ – the capacity an individual develops over time to transact efficiently with their environment (p.297)

focused on details and processes while the extrinsically motivated student will focus on results and rewards for achievement.

When students' level of motivation and interest to learn is increased through various motivational activities, there is the probability that they will invest all their time and effort to attain their set goals (Dembo, 1994; Gagné et al - 1993; Smith and Ragan, 1999). Therefore, making sure students' goals and values are in sync with Higher Education's mission and vision (e.g. in enabling their attainment of academic literacy) is important for generating and sustaining a high level of student motivation. This in turn lead to self-efficacy, self-confidence, improved quality of work and higher future job prospects – or general 'competence' as presaged by White (1959 - op cit).

Thanasoulas. (2002) explained that, some of the conditions and importance of student motivation are the creating of “appropriate teacher behaviour and good teacher-student rapport”, “pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere” and “a cohesive learner group characterised by appropriate group norms”. Ayotola, (1998) suggests that “strengthening the degree of intrinsic motivation students feel for learning” is the most important thing any teacher can do.

There is just one note of caution and that is that intrinsic motivation is only boosted by an increase of extrinsic motivational factors under particular circumstances. Deci (1971) shows that external rewards are very limited in their 'boosting' of intrinsic motivation. What is far more important for the development of intrinsic motivation is – in a student context – positive verbal reinforcement . Clearly, that has implications for the kinds of assessment and feedback we offer to our students.

### ***Academic engagement and social integration***

Student motivation is about goals, energy, drive and direction and having a reason to do what they do and do it to the best of their ability. Through increased levels of motivation, the student is able to believe he/she has the confidence and capacity to achieve (self-efficacy) and has the learning process under control. (See Bandura – 1997 for example – for a discussion about the motivation/self-efficacy nexus).

An indication of academic engagement can be achieved when a student is seen to have combined getting along with teachers, having interest in the subject matter, and related behaviours and attitudes with activities such as effort to work both inside and outside of school, doing assignments, meeting deadlines, and maintaining good class attendance (academic participation). Hence, academic engagement can be defined as the “extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic school activities” Willms, J. D. (2003) Measuring Student engagement is sometimes narrow in the sense that, a student's engagement with a particular activity e.g. academic work is not an indicator of

academic engagement. In 2004, Fredericks et al reviewed over 160 cases and identified distinctive forms of engagement. These are cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagements which according to the report collectively determine a student's academic engagement.

Often, student motivation is constrained by a host of factors that need mentioning in this research. In no particular order, Institutional culture becomes a barrier to promote and sustain motivation. Numerous researches suggest that institutions with healthy and robust culture may provide various benefits of which motivation is one. Institutional culture can also to be referred to as the personality of institution. Peterson & Spencer (1991) used phrases such as 'patterns of organizational behaviour', "shared values", "assumptions", "beliefs", or "ideologies" to define institutional culture. When these phrases that define what institutional culture is come into conflict with the student's beliefs and expectations, their motivation to study is adversely affected.

The role that positive relationships play in enhancing intrinsic motivation has been clearly identified by Deci (1971) and their importance for academic performance by Midgley et al (1989), Furman & Buhrmester (1992) and by Ryan et al (1994). This has implications not only for the kind of experience we create for our students but also, the extent to which we feel able to engage with them at the affective level – not just at the cognitive and behavioural levels.

The higher education community is able to offer a social environment that allow student to integrate and function to the best of their ability. This is always not the case as social integration comes with (for example) competition to maintain ones social membership, how approachable one is, being able to defend ones sense of belonging and demonstrate the ability to connect, interact, and validate ones 'legitimacy' within the community. Thus, the creation of a challenging but supportive academic environment is also highly important.

### ***The academic 'playing field'***

Students entering Higher Education have various factors that impact on their motivation. Such factors range from their preparation for university (how much information the university has given them), course choice, future aspirations and their perceptions about Higher Education. The question this section seeks to answer is (how) does the Higher Education prepare the playing field (learning environment) for students to be motivated to achieve the purpose that drew him/her to academic study in the first place

Student motivation is sustained when confidence in the tutor is high. A tutor who is highly knowledgeable in the content and delivery of the subject matter commands

respect from the students which leads to sustenance of student motivation (Ericksen, (1978, p.3). Higher Education attempts to provide students with non-complex administrative processes to serve their non-academic needs. Student motivation is affected when faced with the frustration of tedious, complex and laborious procedures. For example, students can become demotivated and frustrated when having difficulties with registration of modules, timetable changes, assessment/examination deferrals, fees negotiations, etc.

Assessment and feedback regimes and practices are important too. The relative amounts of formative and summative assessment combined with the authenticity and validity of assessment tasks can in themselves be motivating or demotivating. The importance of feedback in motivational enhancement has already been discussed. Formative assessment is sometimes described as assessment for learning (OECD/CERI – 2008) because it takes place during the course, program or teaching period. Some sources claim that in practice, formative and summative assessment are more likely to form a continuum, because formative assessment contributes to summative assessment (THEA) while Brown and Glasner, (2003) argue that all forms of assessment are formative, in that summative assessment will almost always provide elements of ‘feedforward’.

## **Conclusions**

The study of ‘motivation’ in its variety of forms is something of an academic field in itself and it is a field that is vast. However, there are some pathways into that vastness and for those of us interested in its application to pedagogy, the pathways lead to some discrete (but not exclusive) destinations.

First of all, there is the understanding that in terms of student motivation, there is the intrinsic/extrinsic ‘symbiosis’ to be considered. Secondly, there is the interpersonal dimension of tutor/student relationships for while there are models of ‘the tutor’ – and dominant cultural mental models - that emphasise the power-distance dimension (Hofstede, 2001) in those relationships, the literature on motivation seems to show that “equality-closeness” is (paradoxically) a more powerful motivator. Finally, how we, as tutors, construct the ‘academic playing-field’ of assessments and feedback (amongst other things) are in and of themselves powerful motivators.

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