

Employment Motivation and Job Satisfaction in Transnational Higher Education: A School Level Case Study

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Abstract

This paper is an executive style summary of a collection of studies that were carried out at a case study institution over a turbulent five-year period which began with a school level management overhaul, followed by the onset of a global pandemic. The academic school in question boasts the largest language centre in Asia, and employs over two hundred staff. The leadership insights presented in this paper should be of interest to educators, managers and policy makers alike.

Keywords: *Employment Motivation, Job Satisfaction, Higher Education*

1. Introduction

There are a number of acclaimed transnational higher education providers in the east of China. Some of the most notable include the University of Nottingham Ningbo (UNNC), Xi'an Jiao Tong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), Duke Kunshan University, NYU Shanghai and Wenzhou-Kean University. This paper considers a series of three studies that examined the experiences and perceptions of language teachers at one of these Sino-Foreign institutions over a five-year period between 2019 to 2023. The rationale for the studies stemmed from a desire to lessen the issues which were apparent and, hopefully, lead to improved and enhanced working experiences going forward.

2. Background

Leadership is a complex phenomenon which can be viewed from a wide range of perspectives. It can be considered in terms of competencies, traits, skills and behaviours, and/or in terms of what the individual in question offers or delivers, such as transactional and transformational designs. Notions of greatness also gain traction in many fields and historically as opposed to seeing leading as something which is situational, temporal and, often, culturally grounded (Meyer, 2014). In fact, notions of leadership being a natural born gift can be easily purported

simply because of the power that charisma can have in influencing perceptions, but this in itself can be acquired with practice (Fox Cabane, 2013). Leadership, and management, are also skills which can be learned more generally with training and deliberate practice (Ericsson and Pool 2017), as well as hard work (Duckworth, 2018). In addition, these facets can be evolved (Ferguson, 2016). Indeed, even within these spheres, leadership is evaluated differently depending upon who and what is asked, and accepting for bias and opinion influences (Kahneman, Sibony and Sunstein, 2022), as well as the ability of values and perceptions to evolve as Stephens-Davidowitz (2018) alludes to.

3. Case Study Methodologies and Results

Study 1: The first of three studies considered what motivated expatriate staff to join the institution initially. This first piece of research was an exploratory qualitative study which utilised in-depth interviews that were administered to twenty EAP teachers in the summer of 2019. The intention was to provide a window into the educator’s world, as Silverman (2011) suggests, and drew inspiration from the insights provided by Kahn (2011) when investigating staff perceptions in Oman. Morris (2021) subsequently suggested that the three primary factors which motivated a career move in this instance included employment ambitions, personal considerations, and the convenience of the move. Please see Figure 1.



Figure 1 – Expatriate Employment Motivation Framework (Morris, 2021)

The second area that Morris (2021) investigated in his doctorate research were the factors that satisfied and dissatisfied staff at the same educational provider when they were in post. Drawing initial inspiration from the seminal works of Maslow (1954) and Herzberg (1959), alongside a wide range of studies over a seventy-year period from a wide range of management disciplines, the data suggested that there were four broad areas which were influential to these staff. These areas included personal interactions, teaching and learning aspects, recognition and progression, alongside the employment package. The importance of the immediate, and nonprofessional, environment was also highly influential, and Figure 2 illustrates this.

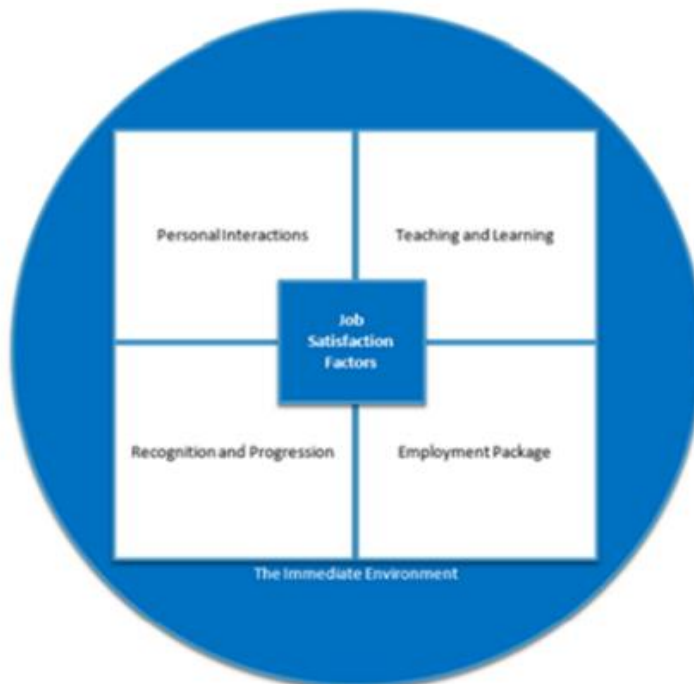


Figure 2 – Expatriate Job Satisfaction Framework (Morris, 2021)

Study 2: Following on from the insights gleaned from this initial study, Li and Morris (2021) conducted a quantitative questionnaire-based piece of research which involved inviting all 215 staff in the School of Languages to participate and which considered the perceived professional development needs of the then staff. From 88 responses, and more specifically 72 EAP teacher sets of data, it was found that during a period in which student numbers were increasing yearly, the pandemic had necessitated learning to move online, and management restructuring was taking place, there were four areas in which greater support and training were felt to be required.

These were with respect to the use of technology, the associated administration of assessments, research (a core part of annual PDR/PDRP reviews and now more inaccessible) and leadership.

Study 3: A year later Morris, Xu and Li (2022) revisited seven of the participants from the previous study to explore through a semi structured interview approach how these staff now felt about their professional development needs and what teaching challenges they now faced. Technology enhanced learning was still a growing source of concern with additional training desired. Increased student numbers presented another challenging area which, along with staff departures, was leading to greater pressures as experience was lost and more work was now required.

4. Discussion

Employment Motivation: There are many factors that can motivate people to engage with a course of action, or influence decision making. In reality, numerous motives play a telling role at any given point in time to varying, often fluctuating, degrees. In this instance the most influential feature was ultimately how easy it was to make the move, which at the time happened to be relatively straightforward. It was also apparent that for many, moving to this provider represented a step up in their careers, meaning that they expected, or had initially expected, to be able to develop in this new workplace. However, as numerous personal career testimonies highlight, expectation and reality can be quite different as Winkler (2023) notes. This is irrespective of how well one may have done professionally previously. Expectation as the saying suggests can lead to disappointment. In this respect, it is important to temper initial expectations, which takes emotional appreciation and control which we may not always possess as Burnett (2023) notes. That said, this regulation is incredibly important given the power of emotions (Haidt, 2021). In addition, it is also understandable that personal considerations will influence any move, and these may fall under either push or pull factors, with the latter likely the more aspirational and forward thinking. Initial motivation can also have a noticeable impact upon satisfaction or contentment, and/or dissatisfaction or discontentment in due course.

Job Satisfaction: As far as the participants in the first study were concerned, most were content with their personal interactions, believing that colleagues and students generally brightened up their days, or at the very least did not make them worse which is not always the case as Mo and Morris (2024) found in smaller transnational educational providers. For management, difficult encounters however tended to increase discontentment and generate unease. In a similar manner teaching and learning related features were also generally perceived as reasonable, despite a sense of the provision lessening in terms opportunities which has remained the case today as Morris et al. (2024) draw attention to. The employment package was also regarded as competitive in the field and profession, and more so given the experiences of the recent past in which many professions and professionals suffered during the pandemic as Morris and Mo

(2023) noted when seeking educators perceptions within the same regional context. The only other broad area under consideration according to the conceptual framework in this instance was recognition and progression, and this will be discussed momentarily as it was an area of dissatisfaction. The inevitable personal professional divide, although incredibly important and acknowledged, was not covered as it fell outside of the professional sphere.

Job Dissatisfaction: Although in study one the results suggested that within Morris's (2021) framework that recognition and progression was a source of discontentment for many staff at that moment in time, what was also apparent was that at the same institution this had not always been the case. In fact, half a decade earlier promotion opportunities had been abundant. This was because pedagogic provision was being expanded and new roles with promotion laden responsibilities created. The reality was that at the point in time at which the data was collected in 2019 leadership overhauls were being enacted, institution level packages reviewed, school and department structures revisited and a watershed moment reached. In many respects perhaps one of the most apparent additional issues that had arisen was that expectations, which are powerful forces as Robson (2022) highlights, and reality were now clearly and rapidly diverging. Old habits were having to change, and this is also difficult to navigate as Duhigg (2014) suggests. Indeed, it would have been difficult to navigate at the best of times with an experienced leadership team in place who held their communities trust.

Professional Development: Professional development can obviously be delivered through either formal or informal learning opportunities, as well as internal institutional and external provider training. Mandatory training is important because it enables staff to perform their work more efficiently, effectively, and successfully, but overload or inefficiencies can lead to problems. Ideally professional development should also motivate those enrolled, and align with career-based needs and goals if it is more bespoke in nature. Given how demanding teaching can be and, indeed, the increased pressure educators have faced in recent years due to the pandemic, a drive towards greater technology enhanced learning, alongside the evolving nature of educational landscapes, as Morris and Xu (2024) have noted, the importance of having an employee wellbeing element incorporated within teacher development initiatives where possible may also be valuable. The reason for this suggestion is simple. Good teachers, and staff more widely, provide businesses and organisations with a source of competitive advantage, but disgruntlement, anxiety, stress and burnout are commonly encountered challenges, and have featured in this case study institution previously.

Leadership and Management Implications: Given the importance of motivation, satisfaction (and dissatisfaction), alongside professional development to teachers, educators and employees more generally, Morris, Morris and Li (2023) also considered the implications of these three studies findings as they potentially applied to EAP leadership and management. Drawing on experience with the UNNC administered Cambridge Assessment PDQ they suggested that there were at least twelve key takeaways. These included the importance of self-awareness and

personalised leadership. The need to have good communication skills, create an identity, build teams and then lead these successfully and effectively, as well as supporting staff with their employment journey were also mooted. It was also deemed essential to protect leaders, promote professional development, network, embrace and lead change and ensure leadership sustainability.

5. Summary

There are many benefits to be derived from evaluating the changes that take place over time. There are equally many benefits that can be derived from reflective practice, and in the areas of employment motivation, job satisfaction and professional development the implications are obvious as far as staff recruitment and retention is concerned. Like most experiences, the greater the ability that these real-life accounts and insights have in terms of resonating with people the greater the potential they hold for personal and professional growth. Likewise, a degree of practice based and personal self-evaluation from time to time is equally no bad thing. In these studies, it was clear that there was a lot of relatable practice taking place, and equally areas in which contextual and temporal influences led to challenges, and arguably opportunities, many of which appear to have been resolved and others which have since evolved. This has been demonstrated in the emergence and results from future studies and the opportunities which now exist for possible future research directions including, but not limited to, additional longitudinal, quantitative and theoretical framework based ones, as well as follow up personalised accounts.

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