**In it for the money? Understanding motivation amongst students of business**

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**Abstract**

This paper was written as a result of short study into student motivation at the University of Roehampton. Its central question is: are students studying Business related courses more instrumentally motivated than those on courses within other disciplines? The overriding conclusion from the evidence seems to be that this is the case. This has important consequences for the way in which business courses should be taught.

**Key Words**

motivation, intrinsic, instrumental, business, discipline.

**Introduction**

It is a truth self-evident that central to effective teaching and learning is students who are motivated. Student motivation is highly complex (Biggs, 1982), and although many extraneous factors influence it that University lecturers cannot control, there are arguably many strategies which can be adopted to improve motivation. This article reports research carried out at the University of Roehampton Business School after it was noted that students of Business appeared to be more instrumentally motivated than, for example, single honours Economics students. The hypothesis underpinning this investigation is that students studying business courses will score higher on measures of instrumental motivation, i.e. they tend to study for the benefits they will gain in the future from a business degree rather than for the intrinsic enjoyment of the subject.

This article will begin with a brief literature review, followed by an explanation of the methodology adopted. The results of this investigation are analysed and conclusions drawn where possible.

**Key definitions**

* Motivation is “why people decide to do something, persistence with it, and effort expended on it” (Dörnyei, 2000. p.520).
* “Intrinsic motivation is the tendency to engage in activities because one finds them interesting, challenging and enjoyable” (Moneta and Spada, 2009. p.664).
* “Extrinsic motivation is the tendency to engage in tasks because of task-unrelated factors such as anticipation of rewards or punishments and dictates from superiors (Moneta and Spada, 2009. p.664).

**Literature Review**

The literature surrounding motivation is well developed and often presents alternative definitions for the same concepts. There are also recurring themes:

**Theme 1:** Different kinds of student motivation are associated with strategies adopted by students towards their studies (Biggs, 1982; Elton, 1988; Jacobs and Newstead, 2000; Moneta and Spada, 2009). Biggs (1982) clearly identifies three main ‘motives’: instrumental, intrinsic and achievement.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Dimension | Motive | Strategy |
| Utilising | Instrumental: main purpose is to gain a qualification, with pass-only aspirations and a corresponding fear of failure. | Reproducing: limit target to the essentials given in course outlines and reproduce through rote learning. |
| Internalising | Intrinsic: study to actualise interest and competence in particular academic subjects. | Meaningful: read widely, interrelate with previous relevant knowledge, discuss academic issues to achieve maximum understanding. |
| Achieving | Achievement: obtain highest grades, whether or not material is interesting; interest in competing and winning. | Organising: follow up all suggested readings, schedule time, behave as “model student”. |

Source: Biggs, 1982.

It could therefore be expected that if a student of business was instrumentally motivated, they would adopt a ‘reproducing’ strategy towards their learning. This was therefore tested in the questionnaire given to students.

**Theme 2:** Contextual differences (Wolters and Pintrich, 1998). This study found strong evidence that students tended to view mathematics as more important, useful and interesting than either English or social studies. Both male and female students rated mathematics as the most important, useful, and interesting subject overall. There were on the other hand gender differences between students of social studies and English. This particular study is however limited in that it includes the students of only 17 teachers in 3 subject areas.

**Theme 3:** Rapport with lecturers (Jaasma and Koper, 1999). This particular study examined the relationship between student-faculty out-of-class communication (OCC) and instructor immediacy, trust, and student motivation. The authors, quite predictably, found that the perception of instructor behaviour is closely linked to the frequency and length of OCC (in the office and informally). Motivation correlated positively and strongly with the frequency of OCC, and to the length of office visits.

**Theme 4:** The change in motivation over time (Gollwitzer, 1990; Dörnyei, 2000; Jacobs and Newstead, 2000). Jacobs and Newstead, for example, argue that they found two types of students: those who are motivated by the discipline itself and those who are motivated by the acquisition of more general skills and experiences. The perceived importance of many aspects declines over the three years of the degree and seems to be especially low in year two, but some skills and experiences show marked increases in the final year.

**Theme 5:** Parental involvement (Adunyarittigun, 1997; Ames *et al* 1993; Grolnick *et al*, 1991; Kroskinen *et al*, 2000; Marchant *et al*, 2001; Stiller and Ryan, 1992; Trusty and Lampe, 1997, cited in Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems and Holbein ,2005). Parental involvement, Gonzalez-DeHass *et al* (2005) argue, boosts perceived control and competence, offers a sense of security and connectedness, helps students to internalise educational values. In turn student motivation further encourages parental involvement.

These broad themes laid the theoretical foundations for this study.

**Methodology**

**Hypothesis**

Students studying business courses are more instrumentally motivated than students within other disciplines

**Research objectives**

The objectives of this research were twofold:

* To better understand the factors which contribute to student motivation
* To better understand how student motivation can be increased / encouraged.

**Data collection and analysis**

An online survey was conducted using the questionnaire function within Google Documents. Questions were based around the key themes identified in the literature. This approach was chosen because it is easy for students to use and it allows for fast analysis of the results by exporting the results as an Excel file. The survey consisted of a number of open- and closed-ended questions with the aim of finding out factors which may contribute to, or detract from a student’s motivation.

The survey was sent via e-mail to a number of self-selecting business students, and e-mailed to students in the Department of Humanities and the Department of Media, Culture and Language at Roehampton. There were 33 responses in total across the three departments.

Given the small sample sizes involved in this study, it was not possible to create statistically significant results. Analysis was therefore focused on the qualitative results using textual analysis.

**Distribution of respondents**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Department** | **Number of students** |
| Business School | 21 |
| School of Media, Culture and Language | 4 |
| School of Humanities | 4 |
| School of Humanities, School of Media, Culture and Language | 3 |
| School of English and Creative Writing, School of Humanities | 1 |
| **Total sample size (n)** | 33 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year of study** | **Number of students** |
| Year 1 | 14 |
| Year 2 | 16 |
| Year 3 | 2 |
| Year 4 | 1 |

**Results and analysis**

A summary of the key results is presented below. All results are rounded to whole numbers.

**Theme 1**

**Results from Question 2: Why did you choose to study the subject you study?**

* Of the business student respondents, 62% gave responses which could be categorised as instrumental.
* 38% of business students gave responses which could be categorised as intrinsic.
* Out of the non-business students only 17% of respondents said they chose to study for instrumental reasons.
* 83% of non-business respondents said they chose to study their discipline for intrinsic reasons.

**Results from Question 9: What motivates you as a student?**

**A sample of the responses from Business Students:**

*“The idea of getting a decent job* once I have a degree to support my previous work experience.”

*“Finding new ways to make money. Meeting contacts.”*

“Good marks and gaining more knowledge. I like what I am studying and therefore I want to do well in the subject, especially in my favourite modules. It motivates me when I manage to impress myself as well as my tutors, and even family and friends. *And that I know it will make my future easier with regard to later jobs etc.”*

*“Being successful and having a job which pays a lot. Also to make my parents proud.”*

**Some of the responses from Non-Business students:**

*“I want to do well for my family.”*

*“My interest for the subject, the modules and my desire to know as much about the subject as I can”*

“I don't know but I wish I did.”

“A desire to engage with the material relevant to my field of study. It's exciting and invigorating and actually has an impact on the most important things, my world view, my sense of self and community, my morality. It's both a therapy and a hobby.

“With that attitude in mind, it's quite easy to learn, only faltering when certain rituals or requirements of the institution get in the way of a genuine learning experience.”

*“My future, my interest in the subject.”*

*“The prospects of a highly paid job.* Learning information that would otherwise take a longer time to acquire. Connecting with others, especially on a global level.”

*“The fear of failure.* The will to prove [to] everyone what I am capable of. The will not to disappoint my family who invest huge amounts of money in me. The need for a stable and successful life after university. To be able to maintain my wife and children in the future.”

(My emphasis in italics)

These results are very interesting. Within the sample of business students, future career prospects and returns on the opportunity cost of the time and money of studying are recurring themes. Non-business students, on the other hand, appear to be motivated by much wider range of factors, with very few citing a well paid job. Unsurprisingly the fear of failure appears to be a recurring theme amongst all students as emphasised highlighted above. This may be due to rising tuition fees and the higher cost of failure compared with previous generations of students.

**Theme 2:** Contextual differences

Theme 2 was also examined through Question 2.

**Results from Question 2: Why did you choose to study the subject you study?**

**Free text responses from business Students:**

“Because it is a broad degree.”

“It seemed like a good choice to make, *I didn't know what kind of job I would want in the future, and business seemed like a good route to take as it kind of applies to almost everything in one way or another.”*

“Passionate about it and *want to have a career* in that particular field.”

From a mature student: “Having worked for 5-6 years, I felt I needed a change of direction and Business Management has always interested me. *It is also a relatively employable degree, so job prospects upon graduation could be improved.”*

“Because I'm passionate about it.”

*“I would like to own many businesses in different areas and thought studying business would be a good foundation for that.”*

“Business is something that I've always wanted to be a part of. I've always had aspirations of being successful and earning a lot of money. Business is a way to achieve these things.”

(My emphasis in italics)

**Responses from non-business Students:**

“For English Literature I wanted to be able to study deeper into Romantic, Gothic and Victorian fiction. As I did not study English Literature for A-level, Roehampton offered the choice to do English Literature with Philosophy, which many universities do not offer. For Philosophy I wanted to carry it on after A-level and hopefully take it further into a masters or something similar. However I liked the idea of debating, and delving into the unknown like Metaphysics! Philosophy has opened my eyes to many different sides of analysing arguments and I have enjoyed it thoroughly.”

“I did it through GCSE's and A-Levels and really enjoyed it.”

“I love to debate.”

“I wanted to study Philosophy because I believe it's the closest I could get to being officially encouraged to devote amounts of time and money to the pursuit of truth and genuine personal development.”

Again, business students generally emphasise the usefulness of the subject in their desire to find a good job, improve their employability or future career options. These contrast with the majority of responses from non-business students who emphasise their desire to increase their subject knowledge, to pursue a subject for the love of it or as one student eloquently stated, to study in the “pursuit of truth”.

Theme 3, ‘rapport with lecturers’ was explored within the questionnaire, but this theme is not the subject of this article.

**Theme 4:** The change in motivation over time

**Results from Question 8: Do you consider yourself to be a student who is motivated?**

* 82% of students answered yes to this question.
* Of those who said no, 67% were in year 2 of their degree.

This question was posed to explore the nature of motivation amongst all students, and how it can be increased. The responses given to this question clearly support the predictions of Jacobs and Newstead (2000) that motivation will tend to be especially low amongst 2nd year students.

**Results from Question 15: Do you feel your motivation varies from day to day?**

The results for question 15 again support the arguments advanced in the literature surrounding motivation, i.e. that motivation is not a constant but that it varies on a daily basis, and that students find it hard to sustain motivation over a long period of time. This again suggests a need for academics to support students to increase/maintain sustain their motivation over time.

**Theme 5:** Parental involvement

**Results from Question 23: Are your parents interested in your University studies?**

* 91% of respondents gave a response that could be categorized as positive
* 9% gave a response that could be categorized as negative

**Results from Question 24: Do you believe parental involvement or interest in your studies has affected your motivation?**

* 73% of respondents gave a response that could be categorised as positive or ‘yes’
* 3% gave a response that could be categorised as ‘a little’
* 24% gave a response that could be categorised as negative or ‘no’

The responses for this question suggest a strong awareness by the students questioned of parental interest in their studies and that this has an important impact on their motivation. This was also strongly supported in the free-text responses and strongly supports the work in this area (Adunyarittigun, 1997; Ames *et al* 1993; Grolnick *et al*, 1991; Kroskinen *et al*, 2000; Marchant *et al*, 2001; Stiller and Ryan, 1992; Trusty and Lampe, 1997, cited in Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems and Holbein ,2005).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results gained appear to support the themes raised in the literature. The most important of these is that students following courses such as Business which are essentially vocational, will tend to display motivation which is instrumental, i.e. courses in Business at Roehampton are likely to be followed by students who are focused on their future career within that field, and thus will adopt associated strategies to their learning.

The implications of this research for teaching practice within the Business discipline are that emphasis may need to be place on the importance and relevance of materials taught to the future world of work. For example, to motivate students learning quantitative methods, problems could be drawn from real world examples using a real companies financial accounts. This may not only boost motivation, but also increase the realism of the techniques taught so that students are also better prepared for the business world they come to work in. This teaching strategy may however require increasing networks with industry so that feedback can be gained from potential employers as to the most appropriate techniques to teach.

Finally, the results support the need for lecturers to be aware of the variation in student motivation over time including it being especially low in second year students, and also supporting parental involvement where possible and appropriate.

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