

Older Academics' Views of Promotion

Jacqui Larkin

*Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Macquarie University, Australia 2109
Australian Catholic University*

Email: jacqueline.larkin@students.mq.edu.au

Associate Professor Ruth Neumann

*Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Macquarie University, Australia 2109*

Email: ruth.neumann@mgsn.edu.au

Dr Paul Nesbit

*Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Macquarie University, Australia 2109*

Email: paul.nesbit@mgsn.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Academic promotion is the main form of career advancement and provides staff with the incentive to continue to strive for excellence in research and teaching. Drawing on the theory of career motivation, this paper explores the perceptions of older academics on promotion, with the aim to gain an insight to university HRM policy-making on the retention of high performing and experienced older academics. Findings from both documentary and interview data highlight a lack of inherent support for career development; mixed views on the promotion process and a lack of promotion opportunities. This paper argues that universities need to make more effort to maintain high levels of career motivation among older academics through opportunities for promotion and development.

Key Words: Academic Career, Career Development, Human Resource Development, Strategic Change

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INTRODUCTION

The retention of high performing and experienced older academic staff is a crucial ingredient in sustaining universities. The national statistics show that 40% of Australian academics are aged 50 and over (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2011) and are a critical signal that universities are likely to experience a substantial loss of academics through retirement over the next decade, depleting the universities' skill and experience levels. Hugo (2005, 2008, 2010) argues that for Australian universities to maintain their current levels of excellence, proactive ways to enhance and retain high quality staff are needed and one group undoubtedly is productive staff in their 50s.

Like most professions, pursuing an academic career requires the opportunity to advance in both expertise and recognition. Promotion provides the incentive for academic staff to continue to strive for excellence in research and teaching (Moses 1986) and is the main form of career advancement. However, Anderson, Johnson & Saha's (2002) national survey of over 2,000 Australian academics, found that older academics were more likely to perceive that their prospects for promotion have declined and that they see this change for the worse. Furthermore, Australian academics report one of the lowest levels of job satisfaction, one reason due to the lack of institutional management support for their career development plans (Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure & Meek 2010; Bexley, James & Arkoudis 2011). Just how these negative perceptions on limited opportunities for promotion relate to the career motivation of older academics is the focus of this paper. Career motivation is a reasonable frame of reference to use when thinking of ways to extend careers and ensure career continuity (London 1983, 1988, 1990).

This paper explores the perceptions of older academics on promotion within the theoretical framework of career motivation, with the aim to gain insight and understanding to university HRM policy-making on the retention of high performing older academics. It reports findings from both documentary and interview data derived from a larger study on career management for older academics. There are four sections in this paper. The first section is an outline of the existing literature on academic careers and career motivation. The second section describes this study and the research approach. The third section presents three key areas arising from the findings, specifically in relation to a lack of inherent support for career development; mixed views on the promotion process and a lack of career opportunities. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and argues that universities need to recognise that older academics will become increasingly valuable resources and HRM policy-makers will need to make more effort to maintain high levels of motivation among older academics through opportunities for promotion and development.

Academic Careers and Career Motivation

The nature of academic careers is complex and diverse. The academic career is fundamentally about knowledge, specifically acquiring, producing, re-shaping and disseminating knowledge and the primary communities are knowledge communities described as disciplines or subject communities (Henkel 2000). There are two distinguishing organizational academic identities: 'locals' are academics who develop their primary identification and build relationships within the university, thus are high on loyalty to the employing organisation and 'cosmopolitans' are academics who develop their primary identification with their academic discipline and build relationships mainly outside their university, thus are low on loyalty to the employing organization (Gouldner 1957). These organizational academic identities are broadly associated with disciplines (explanation follows) and the contribution to one's discipline is important for career advancement and academic promotion. Disciplines encompass the myriad of differing organisational structures of knowledge domains manifested within universities, described as 'academic tribes, each with their own set of intellectual

values and their own patch of cognitive territory' (Becher 1994:153). It is argued that an academic career continues to narrow, as the social aspects of disciplines are made clear as one further develops commitment to their chosen discipline and specialization (Rice 1986).

There are multiple entry requirements to an academic career and variations to entry can be associated with different academic disciplines (Clark 1987). A doctorate and post-doctoral experience tend to be the foundation of an academic career in the 'hard-pure' science fields such as chemistry, physics and biology. Yet, this is not necessarily the case for entry into an academic career in the 'soft-applied' fields such as education, law and management, where professional industry experience may be preferred. However, there is the expectation to undertake a doctorate once in academia. Therefore, the age at which one commences an academic career can vary depending upon the discipline groupings. In 'hard-pure' fields, one could commence their academic career in their mid to late 20's whereas in the 'soft-applied' fields, one could commence their academic career in their late 30's to early 40's (Clark 1987). Study prerequisites for an academic career require at least seven years of study, commencing with an undergraduate degree to an honours degree to a doctorate. The earliest an individual could enter academia is about 26 years of age, assuming at the age of 18, graduate from high school; at the age of 21 graduate with an undergraduate degree (3 years full-time study); at the age of 22 graduate with an honours degree (one year full-time study) and at the age of 26, graduate with a doctorate (4 years full-time study) and there is the additional post-doctoral fellowship, especially for science and science-based fields. We acknowledge that in reality there are many variations to entry into academia and this is not typical or reflective of any specific academic career trajectory.

Career development for an academic is a complex process. Caplow and McGee's (1958) classic study of academic careers concluded that an academic's career success is virtually set by the age of 40. However, Clark (1987) suggests that how far one can progress in their academic career depends upon several interlocking ladder systems. There is the hierarchy of institutions, where research universities

have the greatest prestige and research carries the greater priority for promotion and career advancement; the hierarchy of disciplines with 'hard' fields such as physics are at the top; the hierarchy within institutional faculties and the hierarchy of academic work roles with research regarded as more prestigious and important than teaching. Furthermore, progress in one's academic career is stimulated by the interactive effects of internal factors (such as age, length of experience) and external forces (such as career opportunities) and consequently, there are some 'difficult' and some 'easy' career times in relation to professional and personal matters (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981). In other words, different factors interact differentially at different stages during an academic career. Moreover, academics are said to be conscious of what age one should be in each academic level (explained below) and those who believe that they are ahead of time in their academic career have more positive attitudes towards their work than those who are on time or behind time (Lawrence 1984; Strike and Taylor 2009).

Within the Australian context, the academic career ladder is recognized in a linear career structure that is based on five levels and position titles: Level A: Associate Lecturer (A/L), Level B: Lecturer, Level C: Senior Lecturer (S/L), Level D: Associate Professor (A/P) and Level E: Professor. Career progression is either through competitive selection to an advertised position or through promotion based upon merit, demonstrated ability and the fulfilment of certain expectations in terms of research output and general contributions to teaching and to the university (Farnham 1999). As shown in Figure 1, the spread of academics aged 50-59 span the five classification levels with the highest concentration at Level D/E positions. The proportion of academics aged 50-59 of the total academic workforce have remained relatively stable at 26% in 1996 and at 27% in 2011. Notably, the percentage of academics aged 50 – 59 occupying Level D/ E and Level C positions declined from 49% in 2006 to 42% in 2011 for Level D/E and from 37% in 2006 to 33% in 2011 for Level C. One could assume that this decline is due to academics retiring during 2006-2011. In contrast, over the 15 years, the number of academics aged 50-59 at both Level A & Level B positions increased, with Level

A's almost doubling from 6% in 1996 to 10% in 2011 and Level B's from 18% in 1996 to 22% in 2011.

INSERT FIGURE 1

One approach that can assist in the retention of high performing older academics is for university HRM policy-makers to gain an understanding of career motivation. The theory of career motivation proposed by London (1983, 1988, 1990) is an integrated, multi-dimensional and dynamic theoretical framework, consisting of three domains of individual characteristics: Career resilience is the extent to which one can resist career barriers or disruptions affecting their work. Those who are high in career resilience are competent individuals and are able to control what happens to them. It relates to persistence in attaining career goals. Moreover, Waterman, Waterman & Collard (1994) suggest career resilience means staying knowledgeable about market trends; understanding the skills and behaviours the organisation will need; having a plan for enhancing one's long-term employability; the willingness and ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing business needs and moving on when a win-win relationship is no longer possible (p88). Career insight is the extent to how realistic one is about career expectations. Those who are high in career insight try to understand themselves and their environments and this affects the degree to which they pursue career goals. Career identity is the extent to which one's career defines who they are. Those who are high in career identity are involved in their jobs, their careers, their profession and are likely to be loyal to their organisation. It reflects the direction of career goals and whether it relates to a desire for career advancement or to be in a position of leadership. Furthermore, it is argued that individuals are more likely to have high levels of career resilience, insight and identity when the manager utilizes coaching skills, provides accurate and clear performance feedback, communicates expectations and encourages discussions related to development and career-related decisions (London 1983, 1990; London and Mone 1987).

A number of assumptions can be made in the context of academics in their 50s and these three domains of career motivation. In relation to career resilience, it can be assumed that academics in their 50s would be high in career resilience for several reasons. One reason is that they are competent individuals, having obtained the necessary study pre-requisites to enter academia and secondly, fundamental to an academic career is being measured by judgements of the peer review system, thus, making them capable of coping with a negative work situation. Another assumption is that academics in their 50s would be high in career insight, characteristic of possessing established career goals and an accurate perception of their strengths and weaknesses. A further assumption relates to the domain of career identity. This domain consists of two sub domains: work involvement and the desire for upward mobility and it can be assumed that academics in their 50s would be high in career identity, in light of the fact that there are potentially 15 or more years of working life remaining. Therefore, they would seek career advancement and promotion as the means to increase one's academic standing and reputation. However, the exception to this assumption would be academics in their 50s who already occupy a Level E position.

THE STUDY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

Drawing on the theory of career motivation, this paper explores the perceptions of older academics on promotion, with the aim to gain insight and understanding to university HRM policy-making on the retention of experienced older academics. This study forms part of a wider study on career management for older academics. The research is qualitative, utilising both documentary and interview data. There are multiple sources ranging from publicly available institutional documents to audit reports at institutional level to interviews. Interviews were conducted with individual academics in their 50s and academics holding university management positions such as the Heads of School and Faculty Deans. Faculty Deans in this study occupy both Levels D and E positions.

The research design purposely incorporated the different discipline groups and different university groupings to capture the diversity of Australian universities. Academics were drawn from the four

distinct academic discipline groups: hard pure (HP), soft pure (SP), hard applied (HA) and soft applied (SA) as categorized by Becher and Trowler (2001). Discipline groups are based on the knowledge forms reflecting both epistemological approaches and the social aspects of knowledge (Neumann, 2009) and encompass the myriad of differing organisational structures of knowledge domains manifested within universities, described as ‘academic tribes, each with their own set of intellectual values and their own patch of cognitive territory’ (Becher 1994:153). The variance between these four discipline groups are distinguished by a range of characteristics, such as the entry requirements, the enquiry process, the nature of knowledge growth and the relationship between the researcher and knowledge (Becher and Trowler 2001).

Four university groupings were incorporated. Three are formal and self-selected: Group of Eight (Go8): a coalition of eight Australia’s oldest and leading universities that are internationally recognized for scholarship and research excellence (Group of Eight n.d.); Australian Technology Network (ATN): a coalition of five Australian universities that share a common focus on the practical application of tertiary studies and research (Australian Technology Network n.d.) and Innovative Research Universities (IRU): comprise seven Australian universities recognized for their distinctive and innovative approaches to research, teaching and learning (Innovative Research Universities n.d.). The fourth university grouping is Regional Universities. These universities reside either as outer-metropolitan or in large regional locations outside capital cities and are economically and socially important to their local region (Neumann, Kiley & Mullins 2007). Since the commencement of this study, a formal Regional Universities Network (RUN) has been formed with six universities (Ministers’ Media Centre 2011).

The document data and audit reports included twenty-one universities across all four types while a total of fifty-two semi-structured interviews (Level E (25), Level D (11), Level C (9), Level B (5) and 2 HRM Managers) were restricted to the ATN, Go8 and IRU university groupings. This sample was designed to provide depth and avoid bias. It was deemed that fifty-two interviews was sufficient and reached saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Within the discussion of findings, quotations from

interview participants give their academic classification level, their university grouping and their discipline grouping. No further identification is provided in the context of preserving individual confidentiality and anonymity.

FINDINGS: DOCUMENTARY AND INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

This study draws on documentary and interview data and three key findings in relation to academic promotion will be discussed and each finding will be supported with selected extracts from the interviews. Firstly, documentary data analysis across the wide range of 21 universities did show that universities have the expected range of HRM policies and practices in relation to academic appointment, probation and promotion, study leave and performance management. One key area within the findings is a lack of inherent support for the career development for older academics. The audit reports highlighted that some universities need to explore the most effective means of developing future academic leaders and providing career pathways for Heads of School (HoS) (see for example: University of Adelaide 2008). The interviews with academics in their 50s provided the opportunity to probe further. For some participants, there was a feeling of apathy about promotional prospects as they felt that they are left to their own devices to seek career advancement and/or promotion.

I'm too old to even think about another promotion, I guess it just depends where things go. If I felt that I had made a significant contribution in the research area it would justify an application for professor. (A/P, Go8, HA)

It is paradoxical that academics in their 50s already occupying Level E positions have very little empathy for academics in their 50s who have yet to achieve this level as they believe that they should be self-directed in career terms and without assistance or support from the university.

I think there's a limit to how much people in their forties and fifties should expect or even be offered assistance. I think if you get to that point, heavens you know, you're a parent, often a grandparent. You should be able to stand on your own two feet, frankly. (Professor, IRU, SP)

Most notably, as university academic managers are appointed as leaders in their discipline, they are expected to show leadership in the management and direction of their faculty and the university, but there was little evidence of this leadership in their comments. In some cases, their attitude towards academics in their 50s is somewhat concerning.

If you're in your 50s you're assumed to be pretty self-sufficient, you've made your way, you've built up your contacts and the emphasis is not on what we can do for you but on what you can do for us. If not, why not, and if you're not and if you're not contributing in other ways that compensate for the lack of it then maybe you're on an exit track from the university and you won't get any support. (Dean, ATN, SA)

A second key area of the findings showed that academics in their 50s had mixed views on the promotion process. This was evident in the documentary data analysis (see for example: University of Canberra 2009) and across a number of the interviews. The following example is an extract from a senior lecturer who had unsuccessfully applied for promotion to associate professor on two separate occasions. He was bewildered by the process as he does not know what else he could have achieved to gain the necessary reward and recognition for the next level:

Somehow breaking through that ceiling into the professorial class is something that they [management] guard very jealously. So little about promotion is about your merits and so much of it is about what the university needs at the time. (S/L, IRU, SA)

While acknowledging the excessive amount of time it takes to complete an application for promotion, many participants expressed how painful and demoralizing the promotion process: *I don't want a*

promotion. Couldn't be bothered and too much effort of putting the whole thing together. It's a pain.

(A/P, IRU, HP)

For some participants, it was acknowledged that the constant promotional setbacks by a difficult process can negatively impact on one's future desire for reward and recognition, to such an extent that they are no longer motivated to seek promotion and feel defeated.

Promotions are difficult processes. There's no perfect promotion system as far as I can tell. Staff feel embarrassed about having to go through this process where they write an essay on their virtue and they get judged according to it. Most staff don't like doing it very much. If they get turned down, often times they feel because they weren't prepared to say how good they really were. It's a difficult subject to engage with staff, but it's also one that has a large impact on morale. I've seen staff so demoralised by not being promoted that they've refused to apply for promotions subsequently. (Dean, IRU, HP)

The third key area in the findings revealed a lack of career opportunities for older academics. This was highlighted in the documentary data analysis, for example: Monash University needs to address the issue to find a suitable solution of keeping academic staff via incentives, without compromising Monash standards (see Monash University 2006). Based on participants' recollections of their career trajectories, a strong sense of disappointment was uncovered and in some cases, academics in their 50s have consciously distanced themselves psychologically from taking any sort of proactive role in advancing their career path.

There's anecdotal type information around my university that to get to associate professor you need to have published somewhere in the order of 35 research publications. And I'm nowhere near that and will never be anywhere near that so I've accepted my lot and I'm no longer bitter about it. I understand the situation and I've made my own conscious decision, it's just a fact of life now. (S/L, Go8, HP)

Certain aspects of university academic managers' discussion about the career support for academics in their 50s imply a distance exists between themselves and the academics for whom they have management responsibility.

There are a few people in their 50s who feel that either they've run out of steam, they don't have any other options and they're going through the motions until retirement. They need to last the distance and hoping that they do just enough but they don't draw too much attention to themselves. Those people are not looked upon very favourably by us. (Dean, ATN, SA)

DISCUSSION

This study explored the perceptions of older academics on promotion using the theoretical framework of career motivation. The findings revealed that the perceptions on promotion were predominantly negative in nature, with specific concerns about a lack of inherent support for career development, mixed views of the promotion process which were not consistently applied. Older academics felt that realistically there was a lack of promotion opportunities available to them. Overall, the findings suggest that low levels of career motivation exist among academics in their 50s.

There are various sources of support for career motivation. Support for career resilience and career identity can be in the form of a working environment that encourages professional growth and that are conducive to risk-taking that rewards innovation (London 1983, 1990; London and Mone 1987). The findings in this study found that older academics believed that their opportunities for achievement and risk taking were limited and constrained by non-supportive management and leadership. This is reflected in university management comments that older academics should 'stand on their own two feet', which does little to enhance the career motivation for older academics. The collegiality among academics in their 50s seemed to be lacking, in fact, a sense of detachment between those already occupying a Level E position and those who have yet to achieve this level, suggesting that it is expected that one should have achieved professorial status in their 50s. Furthermore, the signs that older academics were cynical and had felt defeated by the promotion process, points to low levels of

career resilience and career identity. Career insight can be supported by organisations providing the necessary information about career opportunities and appropriate performance feedback (London 1983, 1990; London and Mone 1987). However, participants had perceived that there was a lack of inherent support for career development, in particular, poor and deficient academic leadership in this regard, signifying low levels of career insight. This has the potential impact on future career decisions such as prompting individuals to self-select for early retirement, depleting the universities' knowledge and skills levels, which would be detrimental for universities. Based on the findings, it is fair to infer, that contrary to the assumptions made earlier in this paper, most of the older academics in this study, appear to have low levels of career insight, career resilience and career identity.

To conclude, the findings of this study have broadened previous research on academics and promotion and makes a contribution to the literature on academic careers. First, this study provides a greater awareness of the views of academics aged in their 50s on promotion. To our knowledge there is no prior research that specifically focuses on this age cohort of academics. As 40% of the Australian academic workforce is aged 50 and over, they represent a strong voice for the attention of university management and are a 'highly experienced resource motivated to continue producing significant research and undertake impactful teaching' (Larkin, Neumann & Nesbit 2010: 12). Second, this study points to the need for university HRM policy-makers to develop a range of strategies that promotes high levels of career motivation, such as flexible academic career pathways for older academics that enables the most effective utilization of their knowledge and skills. Promotion is a central aspect of an academic career, but limited opportunities and non-supportive management, can lead to career stagnation, frustration and increased intentions to leave the university.

Universities, their HRM policies and practices are products of people working collaboratively and their collective actions can influence career motivation. As experienced older academics become increasingly valuable to universities, the theory of career motivation might therefore have something to offer university management and their HRM policy-makers, in terms of understanding that career motivation constitutes an important factor for career continuity in the retention of older academics.

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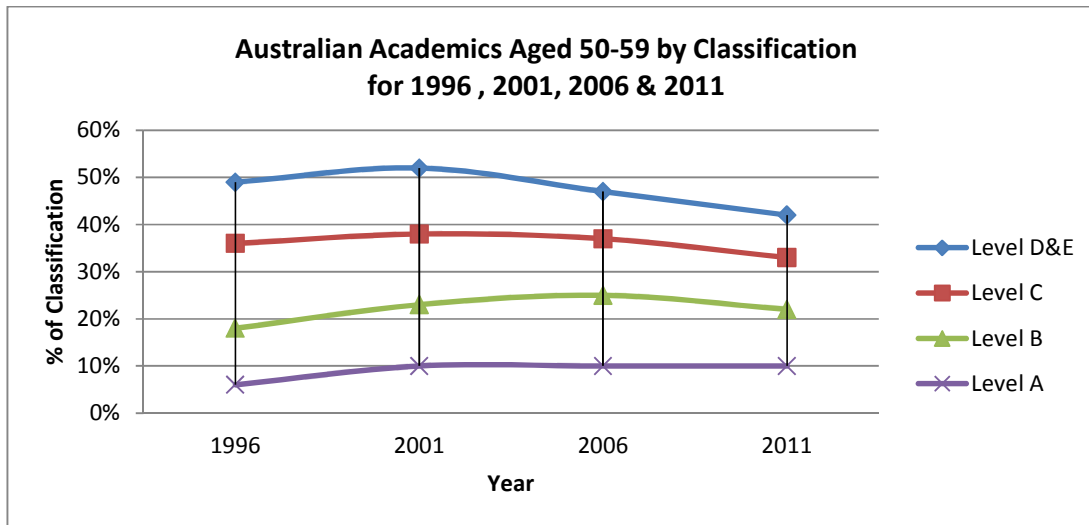


Figure 1 Full-time Australian Academic Staff Aged 50-59 by Classification Level for 1996 – 2011 (DEEWS, 1996, 2011, 2006, 2011)

Note: Even though there are different promotion requirements at Level D & E, it is a DEEWR decision to combine these two levels.