

The Role of Professional Commitment in Academics' Career Decisions – A Qualitative Study

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Academics typically have a strong affective commitment to their profession. If they are highly committed to academia then they have a strong desire to remain in the academic profession and to pursue its goals and values such as intellectual honesty and searching for truth (Meyer/Allen/Smith 1993). Research shows that affective professional commitment is a critical element of academics' performance and intention to stay in academia (e.g., Jauch/Glueck/Osborn 1978). Surprisingly, despite its importance, there is very little research about the formation and development process of academics' affective professional commitment. On the one hand, the career stage approach suggests that affective commitment can change over time and that such a change is more likely in the "trial stage" of a PhD student. On the other hand, research by Green and Bauer (1995) and others show that academics' professional commitment appears to be rather stable and largely independent of the working environment. However, these studies neglect the individuals who left academia without achieving their career goals (a PhD or full professorship). Thus, the question remains whether and, if yes, why there are commitment differences between those who stayed in and those who left the academic profession. To answer this question, a qualitative approach is chosen, to get a better understanding of the critical influencing factors, the individuals' mind-sets, and behaviors that jointly determine the development of affective commitment. In total, 41 interviews have been conducted in spring 2016 with German academics who are working at universities and individuals who left academia without reaching their academic goals. The interviews are being analyzed by using Mayring's (2010) structuring qualitative content analysis. Preliminary findings suggest that a negative development of one's affective commitment is more likely to occur in the doctoral phase and much less likely to happen thereafter. Thus, in the postdoctoral phase one may leave the profession without having experienced a deterioration of commitment. Moreover, a negative influencing factor is likely to unfold a negative effect on one's affective professional commitment and thereby can induce the person to leave the profession if a course of action is chosen which is counterproductive for achieving the professional goal. For example, the demand of a supervisor for co-authorship without contributing induces the individual to isolate him or herself from the supervisor and the scientific community. Thus, the experience of a strong incongruence of values (e.g., regarding honest scientific practice) may trigger behaviors (like, isolating oneself) which are counterproductive and reinforce the reduction of commitment. Based on the findings implications for future research and higher education policy are derived. Overall, this research contributes to the commitment literature by analyzing the black box of the formation and development process of academics' affective commitment to their profession. Moreover, it enhances the higher education research by highlighting the important role of professional commitment in academics' career decisions (i.e., to stay in or to leave academia).

References:

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