
**Motivating Remote Employees in Higher Education:
A Comparative Study of Multi-Generational Employees in the Netherlands and
Germany**

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Abstract. Technological advancements and sophisticated information and technological systems are being increasingly used by organizations which affect our daily lives to a large extent. COVID-19 pandemic has fast-forwarded the transition towards a virtual workforce and remote working. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not an exemption and still after the world has come to put an end on the pandemic there are still uncertainties about the extent to which educational systems will use online or hybrid working systems and how this phenomenon can affect motivation of academics. The study uses a phenomenological approach, and it is comparative in nature where the motivation and experience of university faculty members and researchers from different generations is compared in Germany and the Netherlands. A total number of 23 interviews were conducted with academics in the mentioned countries. Findings reveal that there are some similarities and differences amongst different generations regarding the impact of remote working on employee's motivation. This study provides crucial information for policymakers in the higher education sector to rethink and reformulate HR policies in a manner that can enhance employees' motivation when working remotely, considering the needs and expectations of different generations.

Keywords: employees' motivation, phenomenological study, hybrid working systems, remote work, virtual working environment

Introduction

Research suggests that working remotely is less motivating than working from the office. The drop in motivation increases further if people do not have a choice in where they work, which is exactly what happened due to COVID-19 during the past two years: people were forced to work from home as they were requested to not leave their houses (McGregor & Doshi, 2020). Poor motivation has negative consequences for both employers and employees, as it may lead to higher employee turnover, poor communication, lower quality of work, reduced productivity, and decreased engagement (Andriotis, 2016).

Even though there is research that suggests that generations are motivated differently in the workplace and age diversity in the workforce is increasing, organizations do not know much about how to deal with generational diversity and its impact on the organization's performance (Mahmoud et al., 2020). As the shift towards a virtual learning environment is rather new, little is known about motivating multi-generational remote workforce in higher education. This study focuses on three generations that are active in higher education: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y (Twenge et al., 2010). Each defined generation can have different expectations, needs, values and priorities, show different behaviour towards technology, and can therefore be motivated differently. Baby Boomers and Generation X are digital immigrants, where Generation Y is considered as digital natives. It is important to

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distinguish between different generations when it comes to technology and innovation, which is the case during the transition towards online higher education. It could be that digital natives are more comfortable with the technological skills required by remote work than digital immigrants (CGI, 2015; Recke, 2019).

While there is research about the consequences of COVID-19 in higher education and thus the transition towards online education (Heitz et al., 2020), there are still many uncertainties about the impact of online or hybrid educational system on faculty members in the new normal. The studies that have been conducted on the topic do not consider what the effects may be on different generations that are currently working in higher education. Furthermore, most studies focus on the continuation of learning activities, rather than support for educators during these unprecedented times (Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020). There is not much known about motivating employees from different generations in higher education when working remotely. This research focuses on remote employees in higher education in the Netherlands and Germany. The reason for choosing the Netherlands and Germany is the fact that these two countries show close bilateral relationships at both civil society and government level. Therefore, the acquired knowledge can help policymakers in the sector to make more informed decisions and possibly overcome social sustainability challenges during the digitization process in today's business world.

Theory

Generational Differences in Motivation

Kanfer et al. (2008, p. 5) define work motivation as 'a psychological process that influences how personal effort and resources are allocated to actions pertaining to work, including the direction, intensity, and persistence of these actions'. According to Sadri and Bowen (2011), motivation increases employees' productivity, their quality of work, engagement, and loyalty, and reduces turnover. As the mix of generations in the workforce is increasing, which brings both benefits and complexity of diversity, it is important to identify the needs, values, and different motivators for each generation (Heyns & Kerr, 2018). Coulter and Faulkner (2014) stress the importance of understanding generational differences, because a lack of understanding may cause conflict in work relationships, increase turnover, and reduce productivity. Heyns and Kerr (2018) described the characteristics of each generation. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) have a strong work ethic and are known as ambitious employees. They prefer hierarchical corporate structures, stability in leadership styles and the workplace, and job security. They are expected to spend their careers at a single organization (Ballone, 2007; Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). This cohort cares about building relationships with colleagues and prefers face-to-face contact. They probably need help to familiarize themselves with the newest technology as it is rather new to them (Ballone, 2007; Hart, 2006). Baby Boomers see financial success as the result of hard work and personal sacrifice and are motivated by promotions and raises (Ballone, 2007). Baby Boomers might feel as if younger generations do not work as hard as their cohort, because younger generations tend to prefer flexible office hours and work remotely (Glass, 2007). However, during the transition towards online education in HEIs, the latter about younger generations may not hold.

Generation X (1965-1981) is different from Baby Boomers. According to Loomis (2000), Baby Boomers live to work while Generation X works to live. Glass (2007, p. 4) states that Generation X is 'often more sceptical, less loyal, and fiercely independent' and that 'the most important thing to them is a work/life balance – something they think boomers do not have'. This cohort demonstrates entrepreneurial behaviour which may also increase conflicts (Ballone, 2007; Hammill, 2005). In contrast to Baby Boomers, Generation X expects regular opportunities for career growth, quick recognition, and rewards, and to be included in all

business aspects. They are motivated by higher earning potential and better benefits. However, this generation will not choose a promotion above work-life balance (Ballone, 2007; Loomis, 2000). According to Glass (2007), Generation X is more outcome-focused than process-focused. The latter assumption may suggest that Generation X are more extrinsically motivated than intrinsically.

Generation Y (1982-1999) is considered to be a confident generation as they were taught the importance of building self-esteem (Glass, 2007). They care about equality, are involved in diverse work environments, and actively participate in teamwork (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). This cohort is born to multitask as they are used to being online non-stop (Hammill, 2005). They engage in skill development because of challenging opportunities that are continuously presented to them (Hart, 2006). Like Baby Boomers, Generation Y are optimistic employees and demanding of their work context (Burke et al., 2015). This generation grew up with technology and is used to communicating through electronic devices rather than face-to-face communication. Therefore, Generation Y can be considered digital natives whereas Baby Boomers and Generation X are considered digital immigrants (Ballone, 2007; Glass, 2007). There are arguments suggesting that the use of generations can be seen as stereotyping while the use of life cycles or age groups is preferred. Rožman et al. (2017) investigate differences in motivation and satisfaction between different age groups and found that the two variables change as individuals age. The study finds that on average, the most important motivational factors for younger employees are higher salary, possibilities of advancement, and the possibility for training and education. The study suggests that on average, for older employees, these are flexibility in the workplace, autonomy at work, and good interpersonal relationships. These findings suggest that employees are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Rožman et al., 2017). However, empirical evidence has shown that intrinsic work motivation increases with age whereas extrinsic work motivation decreases with age (Kooij et al., 2011). Cote (2019, p. 27) concludes that ‘individual needs may be similar to their generation while being unique and different due to their individual characteristics, values, and behaviours’. Other research finds no differences in generational motivation. Heyns and Kerr (2018, p. 1) suggest that management must ‘focus on specific known individual motivational preferences that may exist within groups rather than approaching generational cohorts as homogeneous groups.’

Remote Work and Employees’ Motivation in Higher Education

The overnight transition to online education only started in March 2020 as the consequence of COVID-19. Research refers to the abrupt transition as emergency remote learning (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Olson and Olson (2000) claim that remote work and the use of distance technology reduces the quality of work and productivity and requires more clarification and management overhead. The authors state that employee collaboration on difficult tasks is especially negatively affected by remote work. Handke et al. (2019) agree that working in virtual teams causes challenges. For example, it is hard to create trust and motivation among individuals who are not physically co-located, shy and introverted people can be overshadowed, virtual teams must deal with time difference barriers, and technology adoption and functioning comes on top of regular job requirements. The authors suggest that feedback, autonomy, and support improve virtual teamwork, while task-complexity and ambiguity worsen team functioning within virtual contexts. According to Gares and Kariuki (2020), the transition towards online education causes so-called “Zoom fatigue”, which is resulted from the required use of technology in online education, as it requires more focus and screen time, and therefore can cause mental and physical issues. “Zoom fatigue” can be defined as ‘tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual videoconferencing platforms’ (Wiederhold, 2020, p. 437). However, once emergency remote teaching is over and online

educational activities are well-organized, employees in higher education may experience more flexibility, convenience, and a more dynamic work environment due to remote work (Mahmoud et al., 2020). According to Orsini and Rodrigues (2020), management in higher education must support their employees' adaptation and psychological well-being during emergency remote teaching, to maintain their level of engagement and prevent employees' motivation from dropping due to working remotely. They use self-determination theory in their study and suggest that management should consider the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Especially during remote work, employee empowerment rather than controlling them satisfies their need for autonomy. Management can satisfy their employees' need for competence by providing clear structure and guidance. Furthermore, they should aim to satisfy their employees' need for relatedness by supporting remote communication between colleagues. Satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in turn increases motivation and productivity, as explained by SDT (Orsini & Rodrigues, 2020).

Method

This study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of academics' motivation and lived experiences while working remotely in Germany and the Netherlands. This exploratory and phenomenological research required qualitative data that was gathered through individual semi-structured one-time interviews. The collected data reveal personal experiences and generate a rich description of the phenomenon under study. The required data was collected from 23 academics who were selected through nonprobability sampling and were working remotely in the Netherlands and Germany, out of which nine interviewees belonged to Baby Boomers, ten belonged to Generation X, and four were part of Generation Y. Table 1 shows the number of interviews per group/ country.

Table 1. Number of interviewees per generation in the Netherlands and Germany

	The Netherlands	Germany
Generation	Number of interviewees	
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	5	4
Generation X (1965-1981)	5	5
Generation Y (1982-1999)	2	2

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument a pilot study was conducted with five participants and necessary improvements were made. Actual interviews were conducted using MS Teams and interview transcripts were analyzed with thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti.

Results and Findings

After analysing the interviews with academics, the impact of remote work on the work motivation of employees from different generations, both similarities and differences are identified. The results can be found below.

Overall Perception of Remote Work amongst Academics from Different Generations

After analysing the interviews with Baby Boomers from both the Netherlands and Germany, it can be concluded that the perceptions of remote work were diverse. Four out of nine Baby Boomers had a mixed perception of remote work, in terms of positive and negative feelings. One employee from the Netherlands explained 'it's really a mix, there are good things and bad things, I am really in the middle'. Another employee from Germany stated that next to the positives, his perception was 'mixed in a certain way [...] because I believe that over a longer period, we're missing a lot'. Three out of nine Baby Boomers had a negative experience

regarding remote work. For instance, two employees from the Netherlands mentioned ‘I do not like it at all’ and ‘at the beginning, it was quite positive, but that’s decreasing, it’s quite challenging’. In contrast, two out of nine Baby Boomers had a positive experience. One Baby Boomer from Germany said ‘for me, it’s fine, I like it’.

Amongst Gen X participants, the perceptions towards remote work in higher education were diverse. Four out of ten interviewees stated that their overall experience was positive. For instance, one employee from the Netherlands explained ‘I actually like it to be honest [...] I wish it could stay like this’ and ‘I’m happy that I’m working from home’. However, the other three that were positive preferred higher education to not be fully online in the future. For example, an employee from Germany mentioned ‘in the end, my experience is quite positive although I hope of course sometimes I will also be able to teach in class and not virtually’. In contrast, three out of ten interviewees had an overall negative experience of remote work so far. One employee from the Netherlands had a negative experience because of ‘not being in the classroom, means not being in the physical environment where you pick up so many extra signals that you cannot see online’. Another employee from the Netherlands explained ‘there are disadvantages and advantages for both things, but I tend to incline more towards the negative’. Furthermore, three out of ten participants had a mixed feeling towards remote work. For instance, an employee from Germany explained ‘it’s now less negative than in the beginning, but I still would prefer to do everything live’. On the contrary, an employee from the Netherlands said, ‘it’s still positive, but it’s getting more negative’.

Analysing the interviews that were conducted with employees from Generation Y from both the Netherlands and Germany, shows that the perceptions towards remote work in higher education were divided. Two out of four employees had an overall positive experience of remote work in higher education while the other two had a mixed experience of positive and negative feelings but were leaning more towards the negative.

Remote Work and Motivation

Baby boomers experience

Results show that remote work had a significant impact on *the social needs* of Baby Boomers. Eight out of nine explained that social contacts were lacking, saying things such as ‘I’m missing the social contexts’ and ‘social contacts really declined’. One Baby Boomer working in Germany argued ‘I do all my work at home which means no social contacts to colleagues, no personal contacts to students [...] you do everything alone’. Another Baby Boomer from Germany added ‘you cannot smell the people, you cannot see the entire body of the people. Communication is much more than talking and seeing a picture’. One employee from the Netherlands explained ‘we only have contact online and that’s not sufficient enough, not at all’.

The responses regarding *support and supervision* show that Baby Boomers received when working remotely from their employers were diverse. Five out of nine Baby Boomers felt that their employer provided them with the appropriate support when working remotely. On the other hand, four out of nine Baby Boomers felt that their employer was not providing them with enough support when working remotely. One respondent who is working in the Netherlands mentioned ‘I think there was no support at all, I think we were just left to ourselves’ and added ‘technical IT things are not good’. Other participant from the Netherlands stated, ‘[The school] offered me a proper chair and a proper screen and that’s it’ and ‘I got an office chair, a big screen, and a keyboard. Apart from that, not so much’. Another Baby Boomer from the Netherlands explained ‘we were provided with some links from Microsoft and Zoom, some self-paced training on the Internet. But that’s it and I expected much more’. He added ‘they do not provide us with support on how we should teach online, if you compare it to the support we used to get during our normal way of lecturing’.

Remote work in higher education had different effects on *growth and advancement* for Baby Boomers. The majority of Baby Boomers mentioned that they experienced growth when working remotely in higher education, but differently. One Baby Boomer from the Netherlands mentioned 'I think it's better here at home. I learn more, I produce better courses in my opinion'. An employee working in Germany agreed and said 'a whole lot of new things had to be learnt and it was really also a lot of interesting experiences. Another employee from the Netherlands added 'I do experience growth, like I'm attending an online conference today'. In contrast, three out of nine Baby Boomers felt that their self-actualization needs were suffering due to remote work. One of the employees from the Netherlands stated, 'I cannot have interesting discussions with colleagues anymore, those chats we used to have in the coffee corner, that's gone' and 'when I am at school, I have much more interesting conversations with colleagues. Right now, it's very poor so I do not feel like I learn from them like I used to'.

Remote work has had a significant impact on *the nature of work* for eight out of nine Baby Boomers. One participant from the Netherlands stated, 'remote work sometimes requires more discipline, flexibility, and online communication skills from the lecturer'. Employees from Germany claimed that 'it is more intensive and more time consuming if we look at preparation and communication [...] the contact between the students is not as intensive as it would be in class, so more questions for me' and 'recording videos and preparing is a major effort'.

After analysing *the motivational factors* that would make Baby Boomers happy to work (partially) remotely in higher education, the findings were divergent. The motivational factor that was mentioned most, namely by four out of nine Baby Boomers, was social and professional support. For instance, one Baby Boomer from the Netherlands stated 'what I expect from them is to support collaboration and engagement with other colleagues so that they would support sharing information [...] I would like that to improve my skills and to explore more in this remote business'. Also, 'more professional support about the way you should execute remote lecturing'. Three Baby Boomers mentioned autonomy and freedom as a motivational factor. One German Baby Boomer said 'to decide myself on which parts should be done remotely and which parts shouldn't [...] this would motivate me'. Two Baby Boomers mentioned that they would like more recognition and appreciation. The Baby Boomers were working in the Netherlands and mentioned 'a bit more compliments would be nice' and 'I would like more appreciation on a personal level'. Other motivational factors that Baby Boomers mentioned were efficiency; no travel time; management should listen more to the teachers; management must stop changing platforms all the time; more time must be allocated to tasks online; more flexible schedule; learning something new; additional tools; more contact with students while coaching them.

Generation X experience

Generation X gave distinct answers regarding the impact of remote work on their work motivation. Four out of ten participants explained that remote work negatively affected their work motivation, mainly because of a lack of social interaction. One employee from the Netherlands stated that her work motivation has been affected 'to a large extent [...] the things that give me energy, the interaction with students and co-workers, has completely disappeared' and 'I'm carrying on, I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, I'm trying to make the most of it, but I don't enjoy it as much as I used to'. In contrast, three out of ten interviewees stated that remote work positively affected their work motivation, mainly because they saw it as a positive challenge. One employee from Germany explained 'I was really happy to try out new things and that motivated me' and 'it motivated me to change the way I teach'.

When Generation X was asked about their *social needs*, it turned out that remote work decreased social interaction for every participant. Employees from the Netherlands explained 'my social needs are very compromised, and I really miss them' and 'my need for affiliation is

dominant [...] I don't think that need is fully met because of not being able to be in the classroom or to have coffee with colleagues'. Another employee from Germany added 'we had very little contact here at university and I find that very disorienting'. Some explained that they missed interaction with students whereas others explained that they missed socializing with colleagues.

The majority of Generation X felt that they overall received adequate *support* from their employer when working remotely, in terms of technical support and equipment. An employee from Germany stated, 'they gave us a lot of options, but everything was voluntary, so you only take as much as you can handle'. Another employee from the Netherlands added 'there are opportunities to join meetings or workshops and then you can sign up'.

In terms of *growth and self-actualization*, all participants from Generation X felt that remote work allowed them to grow professionally. One employee from the Netherlands stated, 'I feel that I learned a lot and that is a good learning experience'. An employee from Germany added 'I feel like it's very self-actualizing to me when I try out something new'. The main areas of growth were related to technical skills and teaching skills and they turned out to be equally important and somewhat interconnected.

Generation X mentioned several aspects regarding the *nature of the work* that changed due to remote work. The aspects that were mostly discussed were the increase in workload when working remotely and the need to redesign the teaching methods so that they fit the virtual context. Eight out of ten interviewees mentioned that remote work increased the workload for different reasons.

Generation X provided some similar answers when asked about *motivational factors* when working remotely in higher education: professional & social support, tools, and flexibility in time management. The motivational factor that was mentioned by six out of ten employees and was therefore mostly shared within Generation X was professional support regarding practical aspects. For instance, employees from the Netherlands mentioned 'I would like to have support about how to make a proper video and to get some advice about it' and 'if the organization is better able to adapt planning, classrooms, and classes to the online context, that [motivation] would even improve'. An employee from Germany added 'I would really like an answer to the question: how to combine the functions of lecturing, PowerPoint presentations, and a whiteboard in an online setting?' Furthermore, four out of ten considered social support to be a motivational factor to work remotely.

Generation Y experience

When looking at the impact of remote work on the work motivation of employees, it can be concluded that Generation Y has different experiences. One employee from Germany stated that motivation is sometimes high and sometimes low. She stated that 'it's kind of up and down because sometimes I'm super motivated [...] but some days I'm like, oh, I cannot be bothered'. She explained that the type of class has an influence on her motivation. For instance, in some online language classes it is hard to get students to speak, which lowers her motivation. In contrast, an employee from the Netherlands explained that her work motivation has increased as remote work enables her to work from her home country.

When looking at the *social needs* of Generation Y, it became clear that most participants valued interpersonal relationships at work. One participant working in Germany remarked about remote work that 'it just shows you how important the social aspect is to work'. Out of the four interviewees from Generation Y, three felt that their social needs were not met while working remotely.

The majority of Generation Y felt that they did not receive enough *support and supervision* during the transition towards working remotely in higher education. One participant from the Netherlands argued 'I think teachers were a little bit left alone [...] I think they could've done things better'. However, she did explain that she is currently 'getting a lot

of voluntary training and it's getting better' and that the head of department 'really keeps an eye on all of us. Another participant from Germany also felt there was no support and said, 'it was more or less a figure it out yourself kind of thing and if you find it out, tell us so we can use it'.

In terms of *growth and advancement*, Generation Y showed mixed feelings. On the one hand, employees felt that they grow personally and professionally when working remotely. One employee working in Germany engaged in hobbies and extra courses. She said regarding her self-actualization needs 'I think that has like pretty much skyrocketed [...] I have gotten better at what I do'. On the other hand, the majority of participants felt that remote work disabled having interesting discussions with colleagues, as everything is planned and less spontaneous. For instance, one employee from the Netherlands explained 'before you could observe your colleagues and talk to them [...] so you got enlightened by their wisdom and knowledge [...] that doesn't exist without seeing them and talking to them'.

Regarding the impact of remote work on *the nature of the work* in higher education there was no general agreement. Two participants from Generation Y said that the workload increased, where two others said that the workload was not affected by remote work. The small sample size of this group of participants makes it difficult to make an assumption about the experience of the whole population.

Generation Y mentioned multiple *motivational factors* for them to be happy to work (partially) remotely. Two participants mentioned 'the flexibility to work from wherever you want' and 'more freedom to go wherever I want'. The importance of this factor became apparent when one interviewee explained that her motivation increased because she could move back to Spain whereas the other participant was less motivated as he was not allowed to go to his home country Egypt. In contrast, an employee from the Netherlands argued 'if you put "remotely" in that question, that's already taking away most of the fun [...] it will be overall less enjoyable and peaceful'. Other motivational factors were career development advice or inspirational channel, an improvement in scheduling and, a reduction in remote work hours.

Future of education

Overall, the generations mainly prefer education to be partially online and partially offline in the future. Most respondents did not want to go back to the traditional form of education nor wanted to stay 100% online. When asked about the extent to which education should be online, most opinions were in favour of a 50/50 division or hybrid model, which was referred to as "blended learning" by participants. With "blended learning", some activities can take place online where others can take place in the physical classroom. Opinions regarding what aspects should be online and what aspects should be offline were diverse. In general, when thinking about "blended learning", most participants agreed that interactive sessions should take place in the classroom, while one-way communication can take place online.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The existing body of knowledge mainly refers to negative aspects of remote work in regard to its impact on quality of work and productivity. However, the findings of this study suggest that remote work does not necessarily have to be negative for an organization's performance. Instead, Baby Boomers and Generation Y mentioned that remote work increased productivity. Furthermore, all three generations unexpectedly explained that they were better capable of doing their work remotely, as they experienced less distractions at home as compared to being at the university.

The findings of this study reveal that interpersonal relationships in the workplace increase employee motivation regardless of their age range. The study found that employees' social needs are not fulfilled when working remotely and social support turned out to be a motivational factor to work (partially) remotely in the future. Therefore, interpersonal

relationships at work indeed increase work motivation. Furthermore, the findings suggest that management must use both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to increase work motivation. On the one hand, the findings of the primary data suggest that mutual motivational factors are intrinsic factors such as flexibility and freedom, and extrinsic factors are professional and social support.

This study also shows that throughout remote work, empowerment of employees is more beneficial than controlling them, as the need for autonomy is high during remote work. The study results show that most employees agreed that remote working in higher education involves a high degree of freedom which consequently increases motivation.

When looking at mutual motivational factors for the generations, such as flexibility & freedom and professional & social support, it became apparent that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors were mentioned. Therefore, this study is aligned with Rožman et al.'s (2017) findings, confirming that employees are motivated by both intrinsic and (non-monetary) extrinsic rewards, such as autonomy at work and good interpersonal relationships. As stated in the theoretical framework, the literature regarding motivation being generational is diverse. Some literature suggests that different generations are motivated differently, where other literature thinks of this notion as stereotyping and prefers to look at age groups or life cycles. Some theory even thinks of motivation as something individual rather than collective. The findings of this research show that motivation can be both collective and individual. On the one hand, similarities within generations and distinctions between them could be observed which means that motivation is generational and collective to some extent. On the other hand, the answers from interviewees belonging to the same generation were also diverse showing the individual aspect of motivation. This study therefore proposes that motivation is both collective and individual and agrees with Cote's (2019, p. 27) statement that 'individual needs may be similar to their generation while being unique and different due to their individual characteristics, values, and behaviours'. In alignment with Flynn's findings in (2011), this study also recommends higher education management to put their focus on creating a mature organizational environment where employees empowerment is valued, diversity and inclusion is the core of all activities and employees are provided with clear instructions and guidance. Future research should be based on larger samples and explore the impact of academics' motivation on students experience in higher education.

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