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**ACADEMIC STUDY LEAVE OR SABBATICAL: CONTESTED  
CONCEPTS**

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## **Academic study leave or sabbatical: contested concepts**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to provide clarification of the concepts of academic study leave and the sabbatical, which are somewhat contested in the increasingly complex, managerialist and performative higher education context. A critical review of academic literature is employed to help clarify our understanding of the concepts, but also to identify potential contradictions. In addition, examples are provided, drawn from university web pages. The analysis identifies similarities and differences between the two concepts suggesting complimentary and competing meanings. The paper illuminates the shifting concept of the sabbatical, a term rooted in religious history, to more contemporary notions of academic study leave. This shift is not without difficulty given the complexity and increasing ambiguity associated with academic work. Defining characteristics of sabbatical/academic study leave can help provide clearer operational definitions to assist academic managers and faculty better manage and enhance these two subtly different experiences. This is of growing importance as scholars are confronted with escalating demands for publications in top ranked journals, which are increasingly used as objective measures in the bludgeoning use of performance management systems, to the potential detriment to other dimensions of academic practice, particularly teaching and enhancing the student experience.

**Paper type:** Conceptual paper

**Key words:** sabbatical, academic study leave, concept analysis, managerialism, performativity, higher education

## **Academic study leave or sabbatical: contested concepts**

### **Introduction**

This paper contributes to our understanding of managing one aspect of leave in an academic context by exploring the concepts of sabbatical and academic study leave. Historically, a sabbatical is a period of freedom, relieved from the usual academic tasks of teaching and administration, and an opportunity for intense, unfettered research and professional/personal development. There is a limited literature that examines the sabbatical. For example, Kang and Miller (1999) provide a literature review of the sabbatical leave in higher education, and Sima and Denton (1995) examine reasons for and products of faculty sabbatical leaves. Usually, the focus is on the 'outputs' of such a period of study leave. This paper presents an analysis of these two contested concepts, tracing the historical roots of the sabbatical to the more recent discursive shift to academic study leave.

The analysis presents theoretical definitions and defining characteristics of the two concepts to enhance understanding of the phenomena, and help construct shared meaning. The purpose is to assist managers, faculty and researchers better manage, enhance and evaluate the period of leave. This is particularly relevant in a higher education context becoming increasingly managerialist, with work intensification and pressures to perform, including those to 'publish or perish' (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Forrester, 2011; Wilmott, 2003, 2011), in view of, for example, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)/ Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK.

The paper begins with a brief summary of the changing higher education context. This is followed by a review of the extant literature on sabbaticals and academic study leave, providing a theoretical framework to explain what it is, why it might be needed, who is involved and what they do on sabbatical/study leave, and how it is managed. In doing so, the paper compares and contrasts the concepts of sabbatical and study leave and provides empirical examples of policies and guidelines from selected university web pages. The paper ends with conclusions, contributions to theory and implications for academic managerial practice.

### **The changing higher education context**

There have been extensive changes in the higher education context over several decades. Johnstone et al (1998:2) reviewed the global shifts in higher education under five themes: '(1) Expansion and Diversification--of enrollments, participation rates, and number and types of institutions; (2) Fiscal pressure—as measured in low and declining per-student expenditures and as seen in overcrowding, low-paid (or unpaid) faculty, lack of academic equipment or libraries, and dilapidated physical plants; (3) Markets--the ascendance of market orientations and solutions, and the search for non- governmental revenue; (4) The Demand for Greater Accountability—on the part of institutions and faculty, and on behalf of students, employers, and those who pay; and (5) The Demand for Greater Quality and Efficiency—more rigor, more relevance, and more learning.' The focus of this review is very much on the quality – and efficiency – of teaching and learning, and research performance is barely mentioned. The last themes suggest characteristics of New Public Management, associated with increased managerialism and performativity, concepts that have infiltrated higher education since the 1980s. Deem (1998) and Deem and Brehony (2005) consider this 'new managerialism'. For example, Cyert talked of how 'unfortunately, management in education is still a concept that stimulates a negative reaction from academics' (Keller 1983: vi) with the resultant neglect of management concepts and practices at a time when these

were increasingly required to address challenges in American higher education. Kells (1990) later noted how performance indicators have been developed and implemented in higher education institutions across the globe, in attempts to improve quality. Cullen et al (2003) argue that performance measurement has been high on the agenda of higher education institutions with the rise of accountable management in the public sector, producing various quality initiatives simultaneously as universities face diminishing financial support from public sources of finance. Yet, they argue that utilising key performance indicators on their own can be dysfunctional. In this vein, Forrester (2001) regards performance management as a form of control, not for incentivizing individuals as has been argued by proponents of the concept within public services. Forrester (2011:7) highlights the rise of performance management, arguing that for many working within education this creates a millstone: 'a heavy burden, which increases bureaucracy, intensifies surveillance and monitoring of their work and potentially erodes their working relationships.'

One feature of academic work that is relatively easy to measure, monitor and manage is research activity, whether through quantifying amounts of grant capture or, more often, assessing the quality of research publications through journal rankings lists, for example (Willmott 2011) in the pressure to 'publish or perish' (Espeland and Sauder, 2007). Willmott (2003:129) argues that 'higher education in advanced capitalist societies is currently caught up in extensive ideological and organizational shifts, precipitated by pressures to demonstrate its contribution to processes of capital accumulation, normally articulated as national wealth generation. A high value is being placed upon managerialism and market discipline.' His critique of the UK RAE suggests this was introduced to yoke research to 'industry needs' and increase the stock of commercially exploitable knowledge (ibid), producing more 'knowledge' workers. Yet, he contends that this creates a potential paradox where competitive pressures resulting from research assessment exercises not only distorts research activity but also risks progressive disenchantment with research as an attractive career option.

So, while performance indicators, measures and management may have been introduced to improve the quality of teaching and learning, they have seeped into the management of research, which has assumed greater priority and importance in higher *education*. This shift has various implications for the management of sabbatical/study leave applications, activity and assessment. The next section explores in the more detail the concepts of sabbatical and academic study leave.

### **Theoretical framework: the concepts of sabbatical and academic study leave**

The theoretical framework is informed by a review of literature, structured to address the following questions:

1. What is a sabbatical? How does this compare with academic study leave?
2. Why do we need sabbaticals/study leave?
3. Who goes on sabbatical/study leave?
4. How to manage a sabbatical/study leave?
5. What do people do on sabbatical/study leave?

#### ***1. What is a sabbatical?***

A standard dictionary definition suggests a sabbatical is a leave of absence, often with pay, usually granted every seventh year, to a college professor, for travel, research, or rest. However, the sabbatical has deep religious roots. Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) explain that the initial concept of a sabbatical - or a time of rest - is reported to have originated in Hebrew legend from the word "shabat," an

ancient river that flowed for six days and rested on the seventh day. This is also related to the Christian concept of the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week and a day of rest. It is this notion of rest that was initially associated with a sabbatical. Lev (2001) defines the sabbatical year as a year during which land remained fallow, observed every seven years by the ancient Jews. He notes that, following the notion that "a change is as good as a rest," a sabbatical year should more properly be viewed as the professional equivalent to crop rotation. Both provide unique opportunities for generating more vigorous growth in the next cycle, and Lev suggests that often the post-sabbatical "crop" represents quite a striking departure from what was there before. Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) identify a passage in Ecclesiastes (10:10) which emphasizes the importance of sabbaticals in our professional and personal life. "If your ax (*sic*) is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed; but skill will bring us success." So sabbaticals have a long history generally, and Mayberry (1987) notes that sabbaticals or extended periods of leave have a long history in academia. Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) state that the concept of a break or leave every seven years was the foundation for the development of sabbaticals in education, allowing time when a professor was not expected to teach, but offered an opportunity for rejuvenation and restoration. This again confirms the notion of rest. Sabbaticals allow faculty members time to conduct research, write, study a particular area, develop a research focus, learn a new technique, or work on courses and curriculum. For example, at the University of Reading, in the UK:

It is used principally for the purposes of one or more of:  
Research, Scholarship, Preparation of teaching materials, Re-training,  
Learning new skills  
(Source: University of Reading web site)

However, the opportunity for rejuvenation and restoration is particularly relevant, given the current academic environment of higher student numbers and diversity, increased demands for faculty scholarship (top ranked journal publications) and the challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of faculty members. Thus, defining characteristics of a sabbatical suggest a time for rest and rejuvenation.

Kang and Miller (1999) provide an historical perspective on the origins of sabbaticals in higher education. They explain that sabbatical leave programs began at Harvard University in 1880, with professors granted a year of leave at half-pay every seventh year. By the early 1930s, 178 institutions had started this practice. They found that research on sabbatical leave suggests that it is a positive tool for enhancing faculty morale; that it allows faculty to study, carry out research, and travel; and that it has a positive impact on the institution. Narratives on the sabbatical have stressed the creative, rewarding nature of the experience; the ability it allows to acquire an advanced degree or a new language; and its rejuvenating effects. Kang and Miller (1999) conclude that sabbatical leaves have a justifiable place in education when viewed as a form of faculty development, and that sabbaticals can make a difference in faculty career life-stages. Again, key characteristics suggest rejuvenation through a variety of means, and no reference to performance targets.

Lev (2001) notes that academics generally only take a small percentage of their eligible sabbaticals, and there appears to be diversity in terms of what faculty are eligible for. Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) note that the most common type of sabbatical involves a leave of either one year at half-time salary or six months at full-time salary. Empirically, at George Mason University (2009) in the US, the study leave period is clearly specified:

### Study Leave Period

Leave may be taken during the Fall or Spring semester of the academic year following announcement of the award. Leave may be taken for one semester at full pay or two semesters at half pay. The leave schedule must be approved by the department chair, dean, or institute director.

(Source George Mason University website)

In the UK, the University of Reading has a similar policy:

Study leave is a sustained period of time (usually 3 months or longer) in which the normal duties of a member of academic staff are wholly or substantially reduced with the approval of the Head of School. Such leave is essential to maintain the vitality and creativity required for successful and original teaching, scholarship and research throughout an academic career.

The University's policy is that it is reasonable for a member of the academic staff to expect study leave for one term in nine (or its equivalent). This expectation should not be regarded as an entitlement and the proposals made for the study leave must:

1. Satisfy the academic requirement of the School
2. Be financially acceptable to the School
3. Contain measurable objectives that can be assessed

(Source: University of Reading web site)

The first point asserts the need for the sabbatical to benefit the School as well the individual's vitality and creativity, reinforced in the last point which introduces the notion of performance management and measurable goals.

Faculty members usually need to apply through their departments, school, college, or university for this leave and may be asked to document their enhanced productivity as a function of the leave. This highlights the competing purpose or outcome of the sabbatical. Perhaps this is why Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) argue that as our professional academic lives become more hectic and challenging, we need more strength and tools to be successful; we need a time for renewal or the chance to sharpen our axe to ensure future success.

The emphasis on renewal can be found in other studies of the sabbatical and in diverse contexts. Genovese (2002: 351), a librarian advocates, 'The sabbatical project is the framework within which to do this, but it's the renewal that is the real purpose.' In nursing, Mayberry (1987) recognises the complex management and leadership activities of nurses and suggests a sabbatical is a time for renewal. Similarly, Tiedje and Collins (1996) describe the sabbatical year as letting the fields lay fallow. A glance at dictionary definitions suggests this involves being (a) uncultivated, crop-free, bare, empty, or even (b) uncreative, unproductive, idle and inactive. Whilst the first reflects the notion of an academic's practice (field) being relieved of its usual crop of duties, the second suggests the opposite of the intention of a sabbatical, and even hints at indolence! This may fuel public perceptions as simply paid time off, or an extended holiday, where Boening and Miller (1997) found sabbatical leave programs often described as 'paid vacations' with no accountability. In the context of lawyers, Thad (1973) argues that the sabbatical is one solution to the seven year itch, and should be an opportunity to teach, write, research or relax, but claims that 'A sabbatical is not a long vacation' (p749). Similarly, Schreiber (1985) reviews the sabbatical experience and notes that the term means a rest but acknowledges that it turns out to be hard work. In terms of hard work, Jarecky and Sandifer (1986) investigated the experiences of seventy medical school faculty members in the USA and 80 per cent viewed this favourably, and three out of four had accomplished something substantial, such as writing research papers or books or reorganizing teaching programs, following the sabbatical. This again hints at the mounting tension between rest and targets.

Examining documents available in the public domain, many universities provide guidelines for sabbaticals or study leave, for example, in the School of Physics at Bristol University, UK:

Study leave (also called Sabbatical Leave) is release from duties for a specified period of time to further research, scholarship or teaching and learning enhancement in order to achieve agreed specified objectives that are in support of University and School strategic goals. The only normal duties members of staff should be expected to perform when on study leave are those directly related to the aims of their sabbatical period. Study leave is normally paid but may be unpaid. Study leave is distinguished from blocks of time made available through the scheduling of teaching as the latter is a compression of duties not release from duties.

(Source: Bristol University web site)

This illustrates the ambiguous use of both terms as synonymous concepts. In addition,

Entitlement to study leave is not automatic but based on the merits of a proposal, its specified objectives and planned outputs in relation to School strategy. The maximum period of study leave for which a member of academic staff may apply is normally one calendar year. The minimum period is normally one term.

However, there can be some distinction between study leave and sabbatical. For example, the George Mason website provides guidelines, which explain:

The purpose of study leave is to provide paid temporary leave for the support of advancing scholarly research, teaching, and/or creative activity, including development of innovative teaching approaches and methods. At George Mason, study leave differs from sabbatical in that faculty must submit a proposed project for review, as opposed to a sabbatical which is often times awarded automatically after a certain number of years of service.

(Source: George mason University web site)

So, whilst the terms are often used interchangeably, this latter explanation might suggest that sabbaticals are an entitlement to rest and rejuvenation, whilst study leave is a focused period to achieve specific, measurable targets. A search of literature yielded few research papers referring explicitly to academic study leave. As both terms are usually employed synonymously, the paper will continue on this basis.

## ***2. Why do we need sabbaticals/study leave?***

Why is there a need for study leave in higher education? We have all witnessed profound changes in our academic environments over the last decade or so, right across the globe. In the United Kingdom, Bryson (2004) highlights the commercialisation of higher education and affects on academic staff. Similarly, Askling (2001) describes how changes in national legal agreements concerning appointment, promotion and working conditions have affected the work of academics in Swedish higher education over the last decade, resulting in a period of transformations and radical system changes. Askling (2001) notes that since the end of the 1980s, higher education institutions have grown considerably, with a huge increase in student numbers. In the UK, this growth has occurred particularly with international students, bringing substantial financial and cultural benefits, but also considerable managerial and professional (teaching and learning)

challenges. Alongside this, there is an increasing performance management agenda linked with research assessment exercises, such as the Research Excellence Framework in the UK (Forrester, 2011; Willmott, 2011). As faculty are under mounting pressure to publish or perish, there are increasing attempts to measure academic work, particularly the easily measurable such as articles in top-ranked journals. However, what constitutes a top-ranked journal is contestable. Willmott (2011) highlights the list fetishism in UK and US business schools, and how such lists - particularly the Association of Business School (ABS) version - are used by academic managers to scrutinise just one aspect of faculty performance. However, they may also be used in decisions regarding study leave, as evidenced in criteria, for example from George Mason University.

Dean, Director, or Chair Letter of Support: This letter should explain the importance of the contributions of the applicant. It should also provide sufficient information about the applicant's publication outlets (or other scholarly activity) so that reviewers outside the discipline can judge the relative importance of the publications or activity (e.g., journals, books, conference proceedings, performances, etc). In addition to submitting this letter of support to the Office of Research & Economic Development, a copy must be sent to the applicant's Associate Dean for Research or Senior Associate Dean.

(Source: George Mason University web site)

Toomey and Connor (1988) identify the benefits of employee sabbaticals including (1) continuing employee education; (2) avoiding technical obsolescence; (3) reducing job-related stress and burnout; (4) creating a more productive work force; and (5) stemming the tide of early retirement. In the context of doctors in general practice, Tait (1987) asks - why take a sabbatical - and suggests there are overwhelming reasons why doctors should have a sabbatical period working or studying away from their practices. The "burn out" syndrome is recognised as a real problem in the middle and late years of a general practitioner's professional life, as it is in an academic's. Most soldier on, but become disenchanted or disengaged, which is unsatisfactory for individuals, colleagues and students. Tait suggests that some take to alcohol or love affairs, but a safer remedy is to take sabbatical leave. Tait also believes that this should be thought of not as an optional extra but as a necessary part of medical professional lives, as it is in universities and academic departments, and for the same reason. Academics, once they have tenure, are locked in a system which is unlikely to change for many years. We often are in danger of growing stale and unproductive, which is why sabbaticals were developed. However, in the current higher education context, sabbaticals might be required to address stress and burn out. For example, in pharmacy higher education, Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) note escalating demands on faculty members in scholarly, teaching, and service activities, with pressure to obtain external funding, higher student numbers, and decreased faculty size, and argue it is not surprising that faculty retention is a mounting problem. Genty (2001) writes that 'After almost 12 years in law teaching, I approached my first sabbatical with a single goal: to free myself from cases... emotionally draining for both the client and the lawyer... while I welcomed the chance to have a semester off from teaching and attending faculty and committee meetings, I felt I needed a break from the demands of lawyering on behalf of clients. It did not work out that way.' Sorcinelli (1986) investigated sabbaticals at Indiana University, as opportunities to rejuvenate faculty; faculty agreed that opportunities to learn new things and to take on new challenges and responsibilities were essential to maintaining faculty vitality and identified a relationship between sabbaticals and advancement or redirection in the career. Lewis (1996) reviewed faculty (academic staff) development in the United States and noted how this has grown from periodic sabbaticals, given to facilitate faculty members' ability to keep up-to-date in their



content areas, to full-blown programmes designed to provide support to faculty members in all areas of their lives as academics.

So, sabbaticals/study leave are provided to address a number of issues in higher education, including the need for rest and rejuvenation and the potentially contradictory requirement to perform at high levels.

### ***3. Who goes on sabbatical/study leave?***

There is some variety as to who goes on sabbatical, in terms of full- and part-time staff, academics and administrators, seniority and gender, although some universities produce eligibility criteria. For example, at Bristol University,

Staff ... may apply for study leave for periods of time starting after the third year of continuous employment and from a minimum of the third year since any previous period of study leave. The number of times a member of staff may undertake study leave is unlimited. There is no age limit or constraint with regard to the timing in an individual's career at which the leave may be taken provided that the length of service requirement is met.

(Source: Bristol University web site)

At the George Mason University, study leave guidelines (2009) include the following:

#### **Eligibility**

Must be a full-time, tenured faculty with 5 or more years of service at George Mason University

Individuals whose rank is prefixed with Affiliate, Adjunct, Research, Visiting, or Term are not eligible

A total of 7 academic years (which may include time spent on leave of absence) must elapse between successive study leaves

Full-time Administrative Faculty who otherwise meet these criteria are eligible

A faculty member who receives a study leave must agree to remain a full-time employee of the University for at least one academic year after the conclusion of the leave

A faculty member who accepts a study leave must agree to serve as a reviewer of future applications

(Source: George Mason University web site)

This states explicitly that study leave is available to both faculty and administrators, how many years service is required before applying and a commitment to remain in post for at least one year after the study ends. In addition to meeting the criteria, it is suggested that study leave at George Mason University will be awarded to staff performing well in research, as well as senior administrators.

Study leaves will be awarded on the basis of either the combined record of past performance or of an exceptional record in any of the categories of past performance. It is recognized that study leaves may be needed not only for faculty who have been very productive in research but also for faculty who have excelled in service as Dean, Associate Dean, Chair, or other administrative roles. Similarly to the evaluation of a research record, which requires significant accomplishments, the mere exercise of teaching or service will not warrant a study leave by itself. Applicants need to demonstrate excellence in these areas.

This suggests study leave is only available to exceptionally good researchers or academic managers – mere teaching or other service fails to count. Although the focus tends to be on exceptional performers and senior administrators, Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) suggest that junior faculty members can benefit from the opportunity to conduct a short-term sabbatical leave after 3 to 4 years in the academy, while more senior faculty members could have the opportunity for longer sabbaticals. Hubbard (2002) argues mid-career is a good time for a sabbatical, for professional growth and renewal. Hubbard and Genovese are both librarians, granted study leave. However, Lively (1994) notes that sabbaticals are increasingly under fire citing a highly publicized controversy over a Colorado State University administrator's paid leave of absence which stirred public suspicion about paid leave for faculty and administrators. If the ultimate goal of a sabbatical is enhanced research performance, it is unclear how or why administrators should be granted study leave, if not purely for rest and rejuvenation, which is not so readily granted for lecturers heavily involved in teaching.

In addition to rank and role, there is some uncertainty about the gendered nature of study leave. A sabbatical can be conceptualised as a form of personal and professional development. Analysing the ways in which subjectivities are constituted in contemporary workplaces, Devos (2004) examines a women's research development programme at an Australian university to explore whether professional development programmes can create spaces within which women might develop and sustain alternative subject positions within the dominant discourses of academic lives. With the continuing low representation of women in senior positions in universities, professional development is a key response to redress the balance. However, Hendel and Solberg (1983) explored the sabbatical and leave experiences of female and male faculty at the University of Minnesota, a large research university, with a competitive leave program, established in 1954, which awards faculty a leave for one quarter at full pay; and a non-competitive sabbatical program, established in the early 1900s, which grants faculty sabbaticals for 1 year at half salary. They found that a higher percentage of males than females had received both a non-competitive sabbatical as well as a competitive quarter leave. Despite the variation in percentages of awards to females versus males, they responded similarly in their descriptions of benefits of a sabbatical or leave. This draws attention to the possible gender discrimination in granting leave, and hints at the distinction between study leave and sabbatical.

#### ***4. How to manage a sabbatical/study leave?***

Periods of study leave need to be planned, both by faculty themselves and academic managers. For example, at the University of Reading:

It is important that Heads of School are able to plan ahead. Schools will need to determine an appropriate timetable for the submission and assessment of applications, in order to ensure that replacement teaching and other cover can be arranged.

(Source: University of Reading web site)

Universities vary in the manner in which study leave is managed, whether centrally or devolved to schools/colleges. There is also variety in which applications are evaluated. For example, at the University of Reading:

Most Schools use their Research Committee to approve applications for leave for purposes of scholarship and/or research. Study leave for other purposes is often at the discretion of the Head of School. Heads of Schools should be involved in any prioritisation process and must make the final decision about

the granting of study leave because of their responsibility for the proper functioning (academic and financial) of all aspects of the School. Applications for study leave should contain measurable objectives.  
(Source: University of Reading web site)

Again, there is reference to measuring performance. One of the easiest measurable objectives is research output through publication in top-ranked journals.

Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) note that sabbatical leave programs can place additional human resourcing strains on programmes. They also suggest that the processes associated with sabbatical leaves must be equitable and fair for all faculty members, and that a well-crafted and constructed program of innovative sabbatical leaves at all academic ranks would have profound benefits in the morale and productivity of faculty members. This again draws attention to the competing purposes of study leave: personal health and performativity. This is also clearly articulated in university documents. For example, Bristol University's policy states:

In making the final decision, the Head of School will take into account the likely benefits to the applicant and to the rest of the staff, the impact on the School's workload, the quantity of study leave awarded in the past, the achievements of the member of staff during any previous periods of study leave and the competing claims of other applicants.

(Source: Bristol University web site)

Miller and Kang (2003) also identify the impact that one member of staff going on sabbatical leave can have on those around the faculty member, including fellow faculty both in the department and the institution, administrators, and students, particularly doctoral candidates. Allowing academics a period of study leave would appear to reduce the availability of labour and thus increase HR costs. However, often staff are required to re-schedule their teaching into one semester so no cover is required. This has the unintended consequence of creating significant workload in the period immediately before the study leave, potentially reducing its benefit due to the time required re-charging batteries before leave can be enjoyed and productively employed.

Whilst departmental planning is important, time for personal planning of the sabbatical should not be overlooked. Brazeau and Hawkins Van Tyle (2006) argue it is essential that faculty members should have the opportunity to individualize sabbaticals in accordance with their professional goals as they relate to their teaching, research, clinical, and service (managerial) responsibilities. Miller and Kang (2003) also state that sabbatical leave programs are opportunities for faculty members to creatively design their own professional development. However, university guidelines often state the need to align with School/College mission and strategic goals, suggesting a potential tension. Miller and Kang (2003) also note that sabbaticals are largely unregulated and have increasingly become the object of public speculation and debate. Similarly, Lively (1994) cites the controversy over a Colorado State University administrator's paid leave of absence that resulted in state legislation to abolish administrative leave and the introduction of regulating faculty sabbaticals. Examining documents available in the public domain suggests that universities are increasingly concerned with scrutinising, regulating and evaluating study leave. For example, at the University of Reading:

All staff should submit a formal report within an agreed time following the period of leave to the relevant School Committee/Group. The report should detail the work undertaken against the objectives agreed by the Head of School in approving the period of study leave. The report should be evaluated

and the evaluation passed to the appropriate Board for Research or Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning. An unsatisfactory report will be noted and may endanger future requests for study leave.  
(Source: University of Reading web site)

Similarly, at Bristol University, regulation of study leave is the responsibility of the Research Strategy Group, again highlighting the increasing research performance focus of study leave.

Monitoring the operation of sabbatical leave across the School is delegated to the Research Strategy Group. This includes monitoring individuals' achievement of the broad objectives of their sabbatical leave.  
(Source: Bristol University web site)

The policy states that sabbatical leave can be used for a range of activities, yet focuses again on achieving research outputs, although it is recognized that this is not unproblematic:

The outcome of research is, of course, not always predictable, and the following up of unexpected research avenues may constitute a successful use of sabbatical leave. It is recognised that inputs, even when used wisely, may not yield the expected outcomes. This does not negate the usefulness of a period of sabbatical leave. Where the criteria and outcomes of sabbatical leave are unlikely to be met there may be good reason for this. In such cases, the member of staff is expected to alert the School to the change as soon as possible and, where possible, renegotiate the objectives/outputs of the sabbatical leave.  
(Source: Bristol University web site)

Lawson (1979) argues that faculty should carefully plan both the activities and the financing of a sabbatical year, so that it can be both a productive and a relaxing period, and thirty years later this former aspect appears to assume priority. To help achieve this, Zahorski's (1994) book offers practical suggestions for making the sabbatical experience more productive, satisfying, enriching, and enjoyable through exploring the five stages of the sabbatical experience: (1) pre-application reflection and planning, (2) the application process, (3) pre-sabbatical preparation, (4) the leave period itself, and (5) re-entry and follow-through, which includes the final report. Boening and Miller's (1997) review also indicated the need for specific planning and evaluation of sabbatical leave, as financial restraints and public awareness have brought increased scrutiny to professional development activities of this nature in higher education. Tiedje and Collines (1996) suggest that sabbaticals are a time of professional development and renewal for nurse faculty members and recommend the use of specific strategies to optimize the planning process, the sabbatical itself, and the return after a sabbatical to increase the likelihood of personal and professional success. Jarecky and Sandifer (1986) report that pre-sabbatical planning was the key to a satisfying sabbatical. They also report that post-sabbatical depression was common but not severe, perhaps suggesting the need to plan for the return and demonstrate output.

The end of sabbatical report is increasingly required to demonstrate output. Boening and Miller (1997) reviewed the literature on college faculty sabbatical leave and found those who took sabbatical leaves overwhelmingly reported the experience as a positive one, and that sabbaticals served as a mechanism for conducting research and to improve or develop teaching. However, this does not necessarily translate into enhanced performance. Miller and Kang (1998) investigated Post-Sabbatical Assessment Measures at the University of Alabama and found that while faculty believed they were better teachers and scholars as a result of taking

sabbatical leave, the objective data did not support these perceptions. But how do you measure the outputs of a sabbatical? At Union University, this is articulated as follows:

Research/Study Leave recipients must, within 12 months of completing their leave and returning to Union University, make public their research or scholarly activity in an appropriate venue. Verification of this will begin with the department chair, who will forward the verification to the Dean of the appropriate school or college, and to the Provost... After five years, recipients will provide a brief summary of the longer term significance of research leave.

(Source: Union University web site)

In a context of increasing research assessment, teaching is not considered so important – the question is: what are your research outputs? If you work in a business school, these are more ‘easily’ measured through journal list rankings, but this obsession with rankings does little to stimulate, and indeed stifles, research creativity (Willmott 2011) and serves only to augment managerialist performativity. Perhaps academics in business schools need to adopt Spicer et al’s (2009:538) notion of critical performativity, which ‘involves active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices.’ However, Ragan, Warren & Bratsberg (1999) explored the effects of faculty leaves in the US and found that although the first sabbatical leave typically has little effect on pay, a second sabbatical is usually associated with higher pay, consistent with the proposition that a second sabbatical restores more lost human capital than the first sabbatical. In estimating rewards for research, they found that returns to quality overwhelm returns to quantity, where an article published in the *American Economic Review* (rated 4\* star in the ABS list) boosts pay by up to 11 percent, whereas an article in an unranked journal increases pay by at most 1%. With such returns on investment, this raises the question: what should people do on sabbatical?

### ***5. What do people do on sabbatical/study leave?***

Pheysey (1984) argues that ‘If they are academics they may pick up their research again, like half-finished knitting, or they may get a sabbatical to study on the Riviera.’ This confirms that sabbaticals are for enhancing research but also paints a picture of a half-planned period of study leave. Tait (1987) argues you should do your own thing and refreshment of spirit is a major justification for a sabbatical. This can involve doing the same thing in a different location, or taking to the arts, music, painting and other crafts. For example, Goldberg (1988) explores the opportunity for an academic to work in practice, in this case using the sabbatical for doing social work. Or Morrison (2001) offers some ‘Sensational sabbatical suggestions.’ However, these kinds of activities have not featured extensively in current university guidelines, suggesting a greater intensification of work whilst on leave.

Lev (2001) notes that academics generally only take a small percentage of their eligible sabbaticals. This is because taking a sabbatical, especially an international one, means overcoming numerous obstacles, including approval from your home institution (including how your work will be covered); funding and/or an invitation from a host institution; partner job considerations; schooling for children, and housing (both what to do with your own and what you can find). However, there are websites specifically aimed at helping faculty find sabbatical homes ([www.academichomes.com](http://www.academichomes.com)).

Related to what to do on sabbatical is the question of where academics go. Talbot (1986: 118) notes ‘The decision where to go will be guided by clinical and research

interests and the availability of personal contacts' to make arrangements. Talbot (1986) uses a year-long sabbatical to visit the US and explains the need for preparation and planning, not least to address travel visas, health insurance, vaccinations, schooling, accommodation and tax implications etc. Wilkson (1999) suggests that the Stay-at-Home sabbatical is increasing in popularity due to the rise of the two-career family, and technological advances that allow faculty to communicate with colleagues from home. On the contrary, Lev (2001) argues that academics should leave home. Lev argues that international sabbaticals provide exceptional opportunities for educators to "unfreeze" (Lewin 1951) and transform themselves personally and professionally, yet relatively few ever take this type of sabbatical because of the numerous obstacles that must be overcome. Lev claims that the gains will far exceed the costs.

To summarise, there are similarities and distinctions between the closely-related concepts of academic study leave and sabbatical. Other forms of extended leave exist in higher education, including long-term sick leave, phased return to work, voluntary unpaid leave, enforced leave for disciplinary reasons and maternity leave. Whilst these may include similar periods of time away from the academic work place, and may be fully, partially or unpaid, they differ from a sabbatical/study leave in that there are no performance targets to meet. Personal motivation may also be different, although there are similarities with requesting study leave for reasons of burnout and possibly resorting to extended sickness leave if unsuccessful. Anecdotal evidence also suggests similar pressures for female academics to perform even when on maternity leave, given increasing focus on research assessment exercises, particularly in the United Kingdom. Similar organizational resources may be required in terms of transparent and equitable policies on sick leave, maternity leave and unpaid leave, for example, appropriate planning and sufficient financial resources. In addition, as identified at Bristol University, 'Study leave is distinguished from blocks of time made available through the scheduling of teaching as the latter is a compression of duties not release from duties.'

### **Conclusions, contributions and implications**

The paper has presented an analysis of the contested concepts of sabbatical and academic study leave, drawing on a critical review of relevant available literature and illustrated empirically through selected guidelines published on university web pages. The analysis focused on examining the two concepts in terms of what they are, why they are needed, who is awarded this extended period of leave, what activities they engage in and how the leave is managed, highlighting the need for the leave to be planned and equitably administered. In theory, a sabbatical has traditionally been granted for both rejuvenation and engaging in some other form of work, whether returning to 'professional practice,' or working in a different context, or developing a different skill, which could all be considered professional development. However, there have been significant contextual changes in the higher education sector in recent decades; notably a trend towards intensification of bureaucratic performance management control. Evidently, in light of this, there is an increasing tension between the contradictory goals of renewal and research performance, and the meaning of a sabbatical is either becoming more ambitious and ambiguous, or being superseded by the more performative notion of academic study leave.

The sabbatical is an historic artefact of higher education culture, yet the contested shift to study leave is accompanied by transition from entitlement to competition, from rest to measurable research outputs. The analysis has identified the distinction between study leave (a competitive process through which faculty are awarded temporary, paid leave to support the advancement of scholarly research

and/or teaching) and sabbatical (awarded automatically after a certain number of years' service for rejuvenation and restoration). It has also revealed how the sabbatical, once an established entitlement of tenure, providing a period of leave, to replenish and refresh an academic's self, reflects values of investment in psychological health and assumptions about the intellectual demands of academic work. In an increasingly complex, managerialist and performative higher education context, the right to such leave has become contested, illuminating shifting values and assumptions. The 'sabbatical' has been supplanted by more performance orientated 'academic study leave', subtly transforming the purpose of this form of personal, professional development and rest. Academics are having to contend with these contradictory organizational pressures and tensions when contemplating whether to take a sabbatical (if available) or academic study leave.

This analysis has attempted to elucidate the concepts of sabbatical and study leave. Whilst the terms are often used synonymously, some institutions make the distinction between sabbatical (deserved rest) and study leave (planned substantial outputs). Managers and faculty need to be aware of their interpretations of this form of leave to ensure its intended purpose (clearly stated or otherwise) is met. The analysis has worked towards clarifying current constructions and particularly current practices of academic leave by presenting theoretical definitions and defining empirical characteristics of the concept. The aim has been to clarify and enhance our understanding of the phenomenon, and construct shared meaning, to assist academic managers and faculty better manage, enhance and evaluate this contested form of leave.

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