This is the Author’s version of the paper published as:

**Title:** The development and effects of psychological contracts: An exploration of the contracts established by academics within an Australian University business school

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**Year:** 2007

**Chapter:** 8

**Pages:** 91-105

**Book Title:** Engagement & change: Exploring management, economic and finance implications of a globalising environment

**Editor:** Publisher: Australian Academic Press

**City:** Brisbane, Australia

**ISBN:** 9781875378883

**Keywords:** psychological contracts
academics

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The Development and Effects of Psychological Contracts: An Exploration of the Contracts Established by Academics within an Australian University Business School

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**Abstract**

While research has clearly demonstrated that psychological contracts can have considerable impact upon workplace relations and employee performance, research into the formation, content and effects of psychological contracts between academics and the University has been very limited. This paper explores the content and key elements of the psychological contracts formed by academics within the Faculty of Commerce at Charles Sturt University (CSU). Empirical evidence from a series of focus groups conducted with academics indicates that their commitments to society and the social good, one’s discipline, student learning and development, and the institution of the University, play a prominent part in the development and moderation of their psychological contracts.

1. **Introduction**

The past two decades have seen enormous change in the number, funding, and focus of Australian universities, and this has altered the context and conditions of academic work in Australasia (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005). University managers and academic staff have been compelled to respond to forces and pressures such as the rise of managerialism, increased external and internal accountability, commercialisation of higher education, and tighter government funding.
following discussion provides insight into the emotional and behavioural effects of, and responses to, the changing workplace environment of the Faculty of Commerce at Charles Sturt University. It does so through an exploration of the perceived exchange relationship that exists between employee and employer that constitutes the psychological contract.

2. Psychological contracts: A brief overview
Numerous definitions of the psychological contract have been conceived since the term was first used by Chris Argyris in 1960 (Conway & Briner, 2005), and much debate has been devoted to whether a psychological contract should be understood as a legal contract implying mutual agreement between two parties (Herriot et al., 1997) or whether it is more usefully understood as a subjective construct reflecting an individual employee’s perceptions of an agreement (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). This research follows Robinson and Rousseau’s (1994) conceptualisation and consequently focuses only on employees’ in analysing the content and effects of the psychological contract.

Various typologies have been developed in order to categorise the vast range of contract elements listed and measured in the literature (Thomas & Anderson, 1998; Kickul & Lester, 2001; Guest & Conway, 2002; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). One such typology that has dominated the literature on the psychological contract is the transactional-relational distinction. Transactional contracts involve highly specific exchanges and relate to employment obligations are more short-term, work content based and less relational (Rousseau, 1990; 1995). Relational contracts, on the other hand, are concerned with ongoing relationship, and so lead to the creation of less well defined socio-emotional obligations, which may be characterised by attributes such as trust and commitment (Shore & Tetrick, 1994).

Another typology, discussed by Bunderson (2001), is particularly pertinent to this research. Bunderson suggested that the psychological contract between a professional and his/her employing organisation is shaped by professional and administrative work ideologies. In these ideologically pluralistic work settings, the obligations of the administrative psychological contract confront the ideologies of professional work.
The administrative role of the organisation is to be a coordinated and efficient bureaucratic system that may aim to achieve common goals, market success and legitimacy. The role of the organisation as a professional body is to be a collegial society aimed at furthering the profession and the application of professional expertise for the benefit of the community and wider society (Bunderson, 2001).

While there has been limited research into psychological contracts in academia, this study does draw upon earlier research conducted at Lincoln University in New Zealand (Tipples & Krivokapic-Skoko, 1996) and compares responses by academics at the two universities. At Lincoln, the academics were generally dissatisfied with the extent to which the university had met what were perceived as its promised obligations. That dissatisfaction was associated with a low level of job satisfaction. They also identified career development, payment, long term job security and promotion as common areas for violation of the psychological contract.

This paper offers a preliminary empirical discussion of the formation, content, and workplace effects of the psychological contracts established by academics within the Faculty of Commerce at Charles Sturt University. Drawing upon data gathered through three focus group discussions with the academics, it is argued that in an environment that is exhibiting increasing change and uncertainty, the formation and content of the psychological contracts that exist are of growing importance in terms of the effects upon levels of employee trust, satisfaction, commitment, motivation and teaching and research outcomes.

3. Research Approach

The literature suggests (see, for example: Turnley & Feldman, 1999; Freese & Schalk, 1996; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994) that greater use of idiographic methods to assess individuals’ psychological contracts would be appropriate in order to access and understand the diverse individual experience of the psychological contract. The focus group technique is a method through which dense subjective experience and interpretations can be addressed and discussed. The group interaction provides safety (McCracken, 1988) and generates synergistic effects (Morgan, 1997), so that
responses can be far more revealing than those obtained from individual interviews. As elaborated in a number of the method texts addressing focus groups (e.g., Morgan, 1997; Bloor et al., 2001), this method typically assumes bringing together a small number of participants from a well-defined target population to discuss a set of presented topics under the guidance of a facilitator. Focus group methodology with a semi-structured format was chosen as it is known to be useful in the identification of issues and themes that can subsequently be drawn upon to assist with development of relevant survey questions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2003; Wolff, Knodel, & Sittitrai, 1993; O'Brien, 1993) in future research.

The empirical data that is presented in this paper was generated through three focus groups with academics employed by the Faculty of Commerce, Charles Sturt University, in May 2006. It constitutes one of the few empirical studies which used a focus group approach to understand how academics interpret the psychological contract. Twenty six academics (excluding the researchers) participated across the three focus groups. The focus group discussions were moderated by a research assistant experienced with group facilitation so as to allow for an informal atmosphere and to minimise the power imbalance (Owen, 2001) between the facilitator and other participants. While a limitation of focus groups can be the tendency for participants to deviate from their usual thinking and behaviour in order to ‘fit-in’ with group norms (Kenyon, 2004), the researchers were fortunate to be working with a relatively homogenous group of participants who regularly work with each other thereby minimising the effects of this tendency. The focus groups were of the ideal size, being comprised of six to ten academics (Fern, 1982). To minimise the risk of loss of privacy, and perceptions of fear associated with focus group participation (Bloor et al., 2001), first names or pseudonyms were used during the discussion as, with the signed consent of the participants, each of the focus group sessions was audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

4. Empirical findings

Given that reciprocal exchanges form the basis of many definitions of the psychological contract (Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest & Conway, 2002; Robinson
& Rousseau, 1994), we commenced the focus group discussions with an introductory listing exercise\(^3\) designed to engage participants and assist them in identifying what they contribute to this exchange relationship.

The academics cited a range of personal qualities as a key aspect of what they bring to the University, consistently commenting that their work involves their ‘whole person’, their creativity, integrity, values and experience. Some of the categories of contractual elements presented in earlier studies (Thomas & Anderson, 1998; Kickul & Lester, 2001; Guest & Conway, 2002) failed to encompass the breadth of elements the academics named, which may be a result of the fact that the academics view their work responsibilities in a much wider context than their immediate institutional environment.

The Academics spoke to a strong work ethic and this was evidenced in many comments relating to a willingness to work outside ‘normal’ working hours, being flexible in taking on various roles and tasks, and having an emotional engagement with their work. Commitment to the Faculty and University, and its operations, was commonly named, and a number of academics also made reference to the importance of the University as a social institution. Further, it was consistently stated that disciplinary knowledge, teaching and industry knowledge and experience, and industry contacts and networks, are highly valuable. Several spoke of a deep commitment, even passion, for their discipline area.

Many of the responses reflected deeply felt social obligations associated with their professional status. Commitment and concerns were frequently linked to care for students and society through the institution of the University as a force for good and the service of ‘higher goals’. For example, one academic noted, ‘one of the reasons why I left the industry, is a sense of social justice and the notion that part of the role of being an academic is protecting and developing social justice in the community’. Interestingly, as Bunderson (2001) found in research among professionals, the tension between serving the institution as a bureaucratic entity and as a professional body was a theme that ran throughout our focus group discussions of the content of the psychological contracts the academics formed, as well as the promises and violations
they perceived.

### Table 1 Academic’s beliefs about what they bring to the University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• context for teaching</th>
<th>• loyalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• networks/industry links</td>
<td>• work ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• practical experience</td>
<td>• enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• personal experience</td>
<td>• integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• stories</td>
<td>• creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• active links to professions through professional organisations</td>
<td>• thirst for learning/passion for discipline area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• broad knowledge base</td>
<td>• timidity/compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creativity</td>
<td>• challenge to the status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• access to resources</td>
<td>• wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• desire to convey importance of social justice/ethics issues</td>
<td>• salesmanship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• desire to make a difference</td>
<td>• relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• desire to make society a better place</td>
<td>• patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• motivation-to share experience/teach/work</td>
<td>• sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• openness-willingness to discuss ideas</td>
<td>• assertiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• commitment to teaching/students/the University and its success</td>
<td>• civility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These elements can be meaningfully categorised into four main areas of responsibility. These are, responsibility to: the University; their discipline; society; and, students (see Figure 1).

Building upon perceived promises of reciprocal exchange (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Conway & Briner 2005), the academics spoke at length regarding what they were expecting from the University in return for what they bring to their job (Table 2). Their stated expectations lend support to Bunderson’s (2001) observation that the relational nature of the psychological contract has greater influence on those who identify themselves as representing a profession.
Consistent with Bunderson (2001), the academics claimed to be offering loyalty and a willingness to fulfil role obligations that cannot be formally specified such as excellent client service and productive effort. Their comments indicated that in return they expect the organisation to provide a collegial work setting, defend professional autonomy and standards and for it to help the academic to fulfil his/her ethical obligations to the larger community. Figure 2 shows key themes that were drawn from discussion of what the academics expect from the University.
Table 2: Academic’s beliefs about what the University owes them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic’s Beliefs</th>
<th>Recognition of Skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>academic freedom</td>
<td>recognition of skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autonomy</td>
<td>recognition of professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honesty</td>
<td>consistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empowerment</td>
<td>reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>job security</td>
<td>recognition of family/outside commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keeping a positive external image</td>
<td>recognition for going beyond normal duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care in times of want</td>
<td>fairness in promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trust</td>
<td>impartiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clear communication</td>
<td>non-discrimination for union involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>involvement in decision making</td>
<td>opportunities for development &amp; promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advocacy</td>
<td>promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transparency</td>
<td>study leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respect</td>
<td>flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competency of management</td>
<td>work-life balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equitable pay, fair pay</td>
<td>access to supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support (for ideas, initiatives, resource availability, career development, crises, personal issues)</td>
<td>pleasant social/physical/emotional work environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The desire for professional autonomy was often expressed as a strong expectation of job discretion, an expectation of academic freedom and inclusion in decision-making regarding issues that affect their professional activities. Flexibility and trust were noted as highly valued features of working at the University. As one of the academics commented,

\[ \text{\ldots as long as \ldots [the head of school] knows that he can contact me \ldots there seems to be a real sense of trust there that he knows that if I’m not physically there in my office, that doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m not getting the work done.} \]

Another noted,

\[ I \text{ think everybody does [appreciate the low levels of surveillance], I think there is a degree of trust and obviously there are limits and boundaries and having set those the University is very relaxed about it.} \]
Much of the discussion centred on the expectations of University leaders and managers, fairness and transparency in promotion, and recognition of one’s personal commitment to the profession, discipline, the University and students. The most emotive responses were to do with leadership and management, with issues such as trust, clear and honest communication, transparency, advocacy, individual consideration and respect being prominent throughout the discussions. Even when managerial prerogatives were accepted, academics expressed considerable emotion when discussing perceived failures by the university to address such situations in an honest manner and communicate outcomes effectively. For example, in expressing frustration with the promotion process, it was stated that:

*the final thing is the question of transparency. I find it almost obscene that the deliberations of the promotion committee are not open to scrutiny by anybody outside that inner circle. If they are truly doing the job they are supposed to be doing, and objectively evaluating the applications against the criteria, what is the need for secrecy? I see none. Feedback is given to the applicants, but it is Clayton's feedback*.4

Although many examples were given of instances where the University had fulfilled or exceeded expectations, numerous perceived violations were named5. Morrison and Robinson (1997) draw the distinction between a breach (defined as a cognitive comparison between what has been received and what has been promised) and a violation (defined as the emotional reactions that may accompany breaches). Our interest was in the more emotional reactions to psychological contract breach, that is, with perceived violations. While different issues and emphases emerged across the groups, there was a striking consistency in the unprompted use of the phrase ‘changing the goalposts’ in discussions of promotion in each of the focus groups. Perceived unpredictability in career advancement within the University has caused much disappointment and anger amongst the academics. This anger and disappointment was compounded by a perceived double standard. It is believed that while the University espouses the importance of quality teaching, it is the quantity and type of research that is recognised and rewarded. These findings are consistent with other case studies that found that employees perceive a psychological contract breach when there is a mismatch between management communication about human resource management practices and what they actually experience (for example Grant,
1999; Greene et al., 2001). It was often perceptions of a lack of honest communication around breaches that had turned them into perceived violations and even feelings of betrayal.

**Table 3 Violations of the psychological contract as perceived by the academics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violations of psychological contracts (ranked in order of the number of times they were cited)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. lack of fairness in promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. lack of communication/openness/transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. inconsistency in applying rules ('changing the goalposts')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. bureaucratic administrative system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. lack of respect for professional status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. poor management/University losing direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. greater workload demands on staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. lack of job security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. pay related issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another frequently cited area of psychological contract violation was when the expectation of being treated as a professional was met with the seemingly inflexible and bureaucratic requirements of the University’s administrative system. ‘You’re expecting that you bring in a certain amount of professionalism but it’s shoved in your face to a certain extent because of the bureaucracy’, commented an academic with considerable experience outside the education sector.

While some in the focus groups were frustrated with the daily disruption to their work that resulted from the need to conform to bureaucratic rules and regulations, others were more deeply concerned with the long-term direction of the institution. Indeed, administrative rules and regulations constituted one of the two key issues that were at the heart of most of the reports of psychological contract violation. Many perceived an encroachment of administrative systems that emphasised compliance, conformity, rationality and efficiency upon their practice as academic professionals who require flexibility, personal discretion and autonomy. Some deemed a bureaucratic juggernaut to be a threat to the core competence of the University in teaching excellence and customer focus. An example that was given of the push for compliance was following
rigid performance targets instead of professional development. It was commented,

[i]t’s very important that … [staff development] is done in a very open way rather than this performance review approach where you’re told ‘meet these things’ instead of asking ‘what are you trying to do, what do you see as important for you to develop your abilities and career?’ rather than say ‘attend this teaching course’.

The second key issue was the imperative to increase research output. While it was recognised that research output was an essential priority for the University in order to obtain government funding and remain a viable entity, the research imperative was almost unanimously named as a source of psychological contract violation. Perceived mismanagement of a tension between teaching and research goals was deemed to have caused inconsistency in expectations and behaviour, and this was thought to have had a major impact on staffing, promotion, performance management and workloads. It was noted, for example, that:

... there’s this real inconsistency that one of the pillars of the University is our commitment and excellence in teaching but … it’s all about track record in research and in fact teaching doesn’t seem to be highly valued at all….

This tension, and the alleged greater reward given to high-output researchers, was associated with ‘changing goalposts’ regarding promotion. This was reported as leading to feelings of disappointment, discouragement, anger, bitterness and betrayal. It was also linked to distrust amongst academics towards the University.

The focus group discussions also addressed what happens when there is a violation of the psychological contract. Following previous studies (Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999; Freese & Schalk, 1996; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004), the aim was to explore the impact of psychological contract violation on work outcomes such as job satisfaction (Sutton & Griffin, 2004), organisational citizenship behaviour (Othman et al., 2005), and intention to remain with the current employer (Sturges et al., 2005). Dabos and Rousseau (2004) argued that unrealised expectations can result in increased turnover, de-motivation, loss of trust in the organisation, and decreased commitment.

Utilising Turnley and Feldman’s (1998) EVLN (Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect)
framework as a means of analysing the focus group transcripts, it was found that the most frequently cited responses to psychological contract violation could be categorised as a loss of loyalty or neglect behaviours. Some academics said that the decreased ‘loyalty’ was resulting in their feeling helpless and giving up. In what was a very informed comment, a management discipline academic noted, ‘[i]t goes back to equity theory of motivation . . . you’ll do one of two things, you’ll either withdraw your labour totally . . . or you will slow down’. Others referred to behaviour that saw them less likely to engage in extra-role behaviour. Increased neglect, particularly decreased attention to teaching quality, was a major issue of concern.

An important finding was that the academics possessed strong continuance commitment, and this cannot be explained solely by the costs of resigning. This continuance commitment means that some of the ill-effects of poor psychological contracts could, at least in the short term, be masked because the exit response to psychological contract violation is not strongly evident. More broadly, the negative effects of psychological contract violation were shown to be mediated by an approach to academic work that involved a commitment to the students even when frustration with the institution was high. Collective organisation and speaking out publicly were mentioned as responses, however, in the current environment they were considered to be rather futile activities. When an individual or group felt violated, ‘corridor talk’ was named as a common response.

Surprisingly, the reactions to violation were not altogether negative over time. Some academics have adapted to perceived violations and sought new opportunities for self development. The adaptation response appears to be strongly related to the professionalism of the academic, for when loyalty to the institution declines, loyalty to the discipline and the commitment to students has powerful effects. Indeed, one of the academics went so far as to comment

> very few academics slacken off because of their commitment to the students and because of their professionalism [several other focus group participants verbally expressed agreement with this point and none disagreed] so it doesn’t matter how badly they’re treated, they will still perform close to their optimal level and if they can’t do this they then leave.
Some scholars have argued that the psychological contract is likely to become more transactional after violation (Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993) and we certainly found evidence of this as a short term response as is indicated in the following comment,

*I almost pull my head in and retreat and then just think and say 'all right I am just going to become a contract worker, so if they are going to treat me like this, they’re not going to get the extras and I will just do my honest day’s work, collect my pay every two weeks.*

In the long term, however, responses consistently indicated a level of resistance to breaches and we posit that this may be related to the academics’ wider professional, social and ideological commitments (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Emphasising the importance of their role as professionals, it was commented,

*...you pull back a little bit for while but then the professional nature of what you do starts to take over again and you say ‘oh bugger it’ and you get back to your job. So there’s a short term down and then you level off and back up again.*

Whatever the reaction to contract breach, there is no doubt that the emotional experience of violation can be extreme. Many academics gave considerable emphasis to their deep regret and pain over violations that are often masked by the variety responses taken by employees:

*...there has been, on the part of the University, some fairly egregious departures from equity in the promotion process.... It has wreaked havoc with the morale of a lot people here, some of whom I know have moved on as a result and those who have stayed on and coped with it because of their professionalism or had no where else to go.*

In summary, the focus groups revealed a number of issues and concerns that were common among academics in the earlier studies of the psychological contract at Lincoln University. These commonalities were most notable in the areas of job satisfaction and career development (Tipples & Krivokapic-Skoko, 1997). Our focus group research has provided deeper insights into the processes involved in psychological contract development and violation. Stated commitments to the profession, and the University as an important social institution, highlight important
possible points of tension between ‘bureaucratic’ and professional objectives. However, the high levels of personal commitment to the profession and social goals can have a moderating effect upon the experience and impact of breaches and violations of the psychological contract, thereby masking, at least in the short-term, their often seriously damaging outcomes on staff and the institution.

5. Conclusions and implications

From empirical evidence gathered through the focus groups, we have identified key elements of the psychological contracts formed by academics within the Faculty of Commerce at CSU. Our research suggests that situational factors such as procedural justice (Turnley & Feldman, 1998) and personal ideology (Bunderson, 2001) can moderate employees’ reactions to psychological contract violation. More specifically, the research shows that commitment to society and the social good, one’s discipline, student learning and development, and the institution of the University, frequently play a prominent part in the development, and moderation of the effects, of the academics’ psychological contracts.

The focus group participants deemed their psychological contracts to be in a poor state, and revealed many issues and concerns that were previously identified by (Tipples & Krivokapic-Skoko, 1997) in a study of psychological contracts among academics at Lincoln University, New Zealand. Many of the CSU academics expressed concern at being caught out by change and the unexpected, and noted that the University could do much better in terms of maintaining appropriate, clearly articulated, and consistently applied, strategy and expectations.

Perceived violations to the psychological contract, most notably in the areas of promotion and appointment, were identified as having generated considerable anger, disappointment and loss of trust in the University. The University’s commitment to, and rewarding of, quality teaching was frequently criticised by academics who spoke of their considerable emotional, psychological and personal effort to achieve excellent teaching outcomes. That noted, as Anderson has argued (2006), the lived reality within universities is that the teaching performance record as a means of gaining
promotion will always play a secondary role to research.

As found by Dabos and Rousseau (2004), our focus group discussions indicate that many of the potentially detrimental effects of psychological contract violation can be ameliorated, and even avoided, by ensuring that employer and employee perceptions of ‘obligations’ are congruent. To this end, greater understanding of the academic employment relationship could be gained by University managers through achievement of an awareness of academics’ professional and administrative work ideologies, and awareness of how these ideologies influence academics’ perceptions as to whether the university is ‘living up to its end of the bargain’ (Bunderson, 2001).

Irrespective of the existence of moderating factors, we hold that it is critical for all managers to be sensitive to possible differences in expectations, since perceived unrealised expectations commonly result in de-motivation, decreased commitment, increased turnover, and loss of trust in the organisation. Further, the empirical evidence gathered has revealed that damage to motivation, commitment and performance associated with psychological contract violation is compounded when the imperatives of pervasive ‘managerialist’ processes are not clearly and openly articulated, nor consistently applied.

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A recent University restructure has seen staff of the Faculty of Commerce become members of the larger and more diverse (in disciplinary terms) Faculty of Business.


See, Table 1: Academic’s beliefs about what they bring to the University.

‘Claytons is a non-alcoholic beverage that tastes like alcohol, but here the academic is speaking colloquially and uses the word Claytons to refer to something that is fake’.

Table 3 outlines the key areas of perceived violation of the employment contract.

Following Allen and Meyer (1990), we understand continuance commitment to be based on an awareness of the costs associated with leaving or abandoning the respective entity.