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Recent Developments in relation to Professional staff in UK Higher Education

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This paper reviews three developments relating to professional staff in UK higher education. The first of these is a major report undertaken for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE), which has re-conceptualised the activities of professional staff within a theoretical framework of identity (Whitchurch, 2008a). The other two projects seek practical ways forward for this group of staff, the first via a Continuing Professional Development Framework developed by the Association of University Administrators (AUA); and the second via the publication of case material on career pathways, prepared on behalf of the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) and the LFHE.

Introduction

This paper provides a round up of recent developments in relation to professional staff in UK higher education, in the context of the implementation of the Framework Agreement negotiated between employers and trade unions in 2006 (Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), 2003). The Framework Agreement provided guidance within which pay and conditions were determined locally for all groups of staff. In the case of professional staff, role analysis and job evaluation were used to place individuals on the national pay spine that had been established. The objectives of the Agreement were to improve recruitment and retention of talented staff, to achieve greater local flexibility, and to recognise and reward the contribution of individuals. It had been triggered by the Bett Report (1999), which had recommended that national collective bargaining arrangements be reformed against a background of the expansion of the higher education system, the introduction of tuition fees, and increased segmentation of institutional missions.

For the purpose of this paper, the term “professional staff” represents those groups defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as “managers; non-academic professionals; student welfare workers, careers advisors, personnel and planning officers; and public relations and marketing professionals”. In 2006/2007 they represented 7.5 per cent of the UK higher education workforce (HESA, 2007). The paper describes three current initiatives in the sector, and some of the issues surrounding them:

- a major report undertaken by Celia Whitchurch for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) entitled *Professional Staff in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures*, (Whitchurch, 2008a) (available at www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research);
- a project running from 2007-2009, jointly funded by the Association of University Administrators (AUA), the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), the LFHE and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), to develop a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework for Higher Education Administrators and Managers (AUA, 2008); and
- a project undertaken by John Lauwers on behalf of the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) and the LFHE to develop case material illustrating professional career paths.

Changing roles and relationships

The Whitchurch study was one of a series of reports funded by the LFHE that drew attention to the changing roles of pro-vice-chancellors (Smith, Adams and Mount, 2007), the impact of distributed management and leadership arrangements (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008), and top management teams (Kennie and Woodfield, 2008). Whitchurch demonstrated that the identity movements of a diversifying body of professional staff in higher education had received less attention than those of their academic colleagues, and that employment categories such as ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ belied a blurring of the boundaries between staff groupings, which were becoming less clear-cut. Nor had there been exploration of, for instance, the impact of more project- and portfolio-oriented working on the processes of professionalisation described by Skinner (2001), or of the tensions created between increasingly specialised functional ‘silos’ and the cross-boundary collaboration that is essential for contemporary institutions, internally and externally.

Whitchurch also pointed to the emergence of “*third space*” between the activities of professional and academic staff, creating new understandings in relation to universities as organisations. These understandings have implications for the concepts of ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ in universities, how these are perceived by multi-professional teams, and how professional development might be delivered to such staff (Whitchurch, 2008a and b). Furthermore, career trajectories are becoming less linear in that, at the same time as pursuing formal career paths, individuals are extending their experience through, for instance, project work, outreach and partnership, and development activity ranging from coaching and mentoring to formal programmes that use case material from the workplace (Whitchurch, 2009, forthcoming). Pursuing such opportunities, however, can engender risks for individuals if they take time out from the ‘mainstream’, with no guarantees as to their next move.

While Whitchurch reconceptualises the activities of professional staff within a theoretical framework of identity, paralleling work that has taken place in relation to academic identities (for instance, Henkel, 2000), the other two ongoing projects seek practical ways forward in relation to professional and career development. It is intended that these projects will assist institutions in maximising the potential of their staff for the future.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework

The CPD Framework project arose out of recognition that institutions would benefit from building a pool of talent both for themselves and for the system as a whole (AUA, 2008), and that the expansion of higher education would be likely to require an additional 25,000 professional and support staff by 2010-11 (HEFCE, 2006). Building on its mission to promote “excellence in higher education management through a professional development scheme ...”, the Association of University Administrators (AUA) has a long history of providing developmental opportunities for its members, and the project aims to draw on a body of existing good practice as well as the aspirations of managers and administrators across the sector.

A number of sector-wide issues influenced the design of the project. Commentators such as Barnett (2000) and Bauman (2000) have noted the growth of both complexity and uncertainty in higher education, and their impact on those who work in the sector. Demands from government, funding bodies, quality agencies, the student body, and other stakeholders are not only increasing, but can also be conflicting and ambiguous. The aim of the project is to develop a CPD Framework that will:

- enhance institutional performance through high quality staff;
- develop management and leadership capability;
- enable succession planning;
- support career planning;
- foster equality and diversity of development opportunities across the sector; and
- be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of staff in a range of roles in a variety of institutions.

The project involved a period of consultation, desk research and a series of workshops. This work was undertaken by a consultant, with oversight by a Steering Group. The consultation achieved a 42 per cent response rate from those surveyed in an on-line survey. Although the concept of an overarching Framework had general support, some concern was expressed by higher education institutions that the Framework should not undermine existing CPD requirements, particularly for staff in specialist roles, and questions were raised about whether it was possible, or indeed desirable, to develop a meaningful generic framework. Professional bodies reported that they all had programmes of CPD activities, including one which had its own CPD framework in place. Key themes which emerged from the consultation included:

- *equality of opportunity*: many respondents highlighted what they perceived as a current inequity of opportunity between academic and professional staff;
- *consistency across the sector*: a common approach was seen as enhancing the ability of professional staff to move between institutions, and as providing a benchmark for recruitment and selection across the sector; and
- *professionalisation of support roles*: there was strong support for the opportunity provided by the project to recognize professional staff in higher education as a discrete professional grouping.

Components under development for the Framework include:

- exemplars of professional activity and approaches to it;
- templates for development initiatives such as personal development plans, learning logs and self-assessment;
- links between development that is dedicated to professional staff in higher education and external provision, such as professional qualifications and master's degrees; and
- co-ordination of professional development with institutional processes such as staff review and equal opportunities.

The CPD framework is at an advanced stage of development and is likely to consist of a set of core 'professional behaviours'. Many existing CPD frameworks use the term 'competencies', but the Project Steering Group felt that this implied an overly skills-oriented approach, as opposed to higher order, strategic abilities. Furthermore, the project seeks to dispense with the term 'non-academic' staff, opting instead for the term 'professional services'. The model will apply to all levels of staff and consist of core professional behaviours, which are further subdivided into application to self, application to others, and application at institutional level. The initial outcomes of the work can be found on the AUA website (<http://www.aua.ac.uk/LGM/>), and the final report will be published in 2009.

The Director and Board of Trustees of AUA intend that this project should act as a springboard for further work. Working with the LFHE and other partners, it aims to raise the profile of the profession and to create a sector-wide induction process, building on a variety of pre-existing niche offerings, for both early entrants to higher education and for recruits from outwith the sector. It takes the view that the promotion of higher education management as a career of choice would enable the sector to develop a more visible profile as a significant player in the graduate recruitment market, aligned with the 'employability' and 'professionalisation' agendas. On completion of the CPD project, AUA intends to work with individual institutions to map existing staff development activities against the emerging Framework. This work could be of particular benefit to smaller institutions, which lack the resources to develop their own CPD structures.

Facilitating professional careers

The profiles of the careers of nearly 40 professional staff developed by Lauwers demonstrate that not only does higher education management tend to be 'invisible' as a profession, but that those who choose it as a career are likely to do so more by design than accident. This confirms Whitchurch's findings that the early stages of such a career was likely to result from:

- part-time or vacation work at a higher education institution while a student;
- a desire to stay in academic environment after graduating;
- a desire to work in a particular locality where the university is a major employer;
- contact with someone who works in a university; or
- a belief that experience gained from another sector could be usefully extended by a move into higher education (Whitchurch, 2008a).

The fact that choice of a professional career in higher education tends to be serendipitous rather than the result of active planning raises issues about how careers and career development might be promoted so that they are attractive to talented individuals. Although a substantial proportion of professional staff appear to stay in higher education, the extent to which this is as a result of inertia or opportunity is not clear.

It is notable that rotational trainee schemes, where individuals gain experience of a range of functions and areas of responsibility, do not exist in the same way as they do in other public and private sector environments. Such schemes may be formally recognised where new recruits automatically move between nominated posts after, say, a two-year period, or be less formally constituted whereby vacancies are filled through internal transfers, in consultation with line managers and the individuals concerned. In the latter case, the advertised post is not necessarily the one that has become vacant. Some institutions, such as the University of Warwick, have used job rotation effectively to equip individuals for senior posts either in their own institution or elsewhere, although internal transfers are not always popular in that they can cause short-term dislocation. Furthermore, there may be tensions if such schemes are not reconciled with job evaluation and grading, or with equal opportunities practices that require all posts to be subject to advertisement and open competition. Although these issues create challenges and dilemmas at a practical level, such schemes, nevertheless, are likely to increase the institutional pool of talent for the future.

Discussion

It is in the interests of the sector, and institutions within it, to establish understandings about professional pathways in higher education, and to offer career and professional development that will be satisfying to talented individuals (Lauwers, 2002; 2008). However, a diversification of the backgrounds and career routes of individuals (Whitchurch, 2008a and b; 2009, forthcoming) means that in future such career paths are likely to become more flexible in order to accommodate entry and exit points for a significant number of staff who move in and out of higher education, but who nevertheless bring with them a mix of experience that is both valuable and enriching. Career patterns are increasingly likely to resemble the “climbing frame” described by Strike (2009, forthcoming), with multiple strands and opportunities for crossovers to occur.

Key issues arising for the higher education sector, therefore, are:

- reconciling the impact of ‘portfolio’ careers, and greater traffic of staff in and out of the sector, with hierarchical career structures and functional ‘silos’, both of which may constrain the mobility of individuals;
- using job descriptions and specifications so that they are enabling rather than prescriptive, and so that they enhance the contribution that individuals are able to make, taking account of fluctuating contexts and circumstances;
- creating opportunities for those entering higher education early in their careers, while making space for individuals who enter the sector later on from other spheres;

- recognising that individuals who do not remain in higher education for the whole of their career may nevertheless make a worthwhile contribution for the period that they are there; and
- enabling appropriate opportunities for management and leadership development in ways that integrate learning with day-to-day practice, including formal programmes, mentoring, coaching and ‘just-in-time’ provision.

New understandings are emerging about the roles and identities of professional staff and their interface with academic colleagues, and also about universities as organisations and their relationships with external partners. While traditional frameworks provide a starting point for thinking about professional careers, Whitchurch (2008a and b) suggested that younger staff are increasingly likely to take responsibility for their own futures, and to be self-reliant about interpreting the roles and structures in which they find themselves. This was particularly the case in Australia. Such trends reflect wider changes in the workplace, as reported by Middlehurst (2009, forthcoming), who draws on reports by the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (DTI, 1998) and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2007), to suggest that ‘Millennials’ “are used to exercising individual choice”, and regard “individual lifestyles [as] important”. Furthermore, they will expect employers to meet them half way and respond to individual preferences, in a world in which “... technology makes it far more feasible to design work contexts around the choices of individuals”. As Middlehurst goes on to say, “This will pose significant challenges for Human Resource Departments as they exist in institutions today, but may make the difference between institutional survival or decline in the future.”

Thus, the introduction of the national Framework Agreement may provide the opportunity for institutions to design and customise their employment structures and give greater latitude for rewarding individuals who extend their roles outwith the precise parameters of their job description (Strike, 2005), provided that job evaluation does not restrict individuals in interpreting and developing their roles. Institutions will be obliged to address these issues in order to accommodate an increasing diversity of professional backgrounds and differentiation of roles, and more extended ways of working.

Raising awareness of the attractiveness of professional higher education management as a career, providing opportunities for these careers to be developed and individual capabilities to be enhanced, are strategies that might be adopted more conspicuously by senior management teams in ‘raising the game’ of their institutions. At the same time, the ‘Millennial’ generation are likely to ‘vote with their feet’ and create their own opportunities. Achieving an enabling dialogue between individuals, institutions and sectoral agencies is, therefore, likely to be critical to maximising both career opportunities and career satisfaction, and to assist in overcoming what could otherwise be a dislocation of effort in capturing an emerging “creative class” of professionals who want to “feel [that] they can express themselves and validate their identities” (Florida, 2002: 11).

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