Whitchurch, C. (2008). "Beyond Administration and Management: Reconstructing the Identities of Professional Staff in UK Higher Education". Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management 30(4): 375-386.

Submission to Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management

Beyond Administration and Management: Reconstructing the Identities of Professional Staff in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper describes an empirical study associated with earlier reviews of the changing roles and identities of contemporary professional staff in UK higher education (Whitchurch, 2004; 2006a; 2006b). The study draws on the narratives of twenty-four individuals to illustrate that identity movements cannot be captured solely in terms of a shift from 'administration' to 'management', or of a collective process of professionalisation. Contemporary ideas about the fluidity of identity (Delanty, 2008; Taylor, 2008) are used to theorise the empirical data, and to develop a conceptual framework that describes emerging identities by means of three categories of *bounded*, *cross-boundary*, and *unbounded professionals*. This framework demonstrates that professional staff are not only interpreting their given roles more actively, but that they are also moving laterally across functional and institutional boundaries to create new professional spaces, knowledges, relationships and legitimacies. It is suggested, therefore, that the roles and identities of professional staff are more complex and dynamic than organisation charts or job descriptions might suggest.

Introduction

As noted in Whitchurch (2006a), broadly based, extended projects have developed across higher education, breaching traditional institutional boundaries. These extended projects, including, for instance, student support and welfare, enterprise partnership, and professional development, are capable not only of merging and coalescing, but also of splitting to form new fields of activity. The space thereby created could be said to represent "in between" space, as described by Boud (2006). However, despite considerable attention having been paid to the effects of a changing environment on academic identities (for instance, Henkel 2000, 2007; Becher and Trowler, 2001; Barnett and di Napoli, 2008; Kogan and Teichler, 2007), there has been less recognition of the implications for professional staff. This paper, therefore, offers a conceptual framework that provides a more nuanced description of professional identities than has been available hitherto.

Previous commentaries have focused on a perceived shift by professional staff from 'administrative' to 'management' activity, and on a collective process of professionalisation, whereby, for instance, bodies of knowledge and standards of

professional practice have been established (Holmes, 1998; Allen and Newcomb, 1999; Skinner, 2001; Lauwerys, 2002; AUA, 2000; 2004). Other authors have considered professional staff and their work in relation to academic staff and activity (McInnis, 1998; Dobson, 2000; Dobson and Conway, 2001; McMaster, 2005). However, these accounts have neglected the emergence of a 'twin dynamic' comprising a process of increased functional specialisation on the one hand, and a blurring of activity across professional locations on the other. This in turn gives rise to simultaneous imperatives to maintain regulatory processes and obligations, as well as preparing institutions for uncertain futures in more fluid environments.

The impact of this 'twin dynamic' on professional staff may be explored via the concept of identity, itself subject to varying constructs. Essentialist approaches focus on core elements, which provide the distinguishing features of an individual or group and are associated with a sense of belonging:

> "… constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (Hall, 1996: 2).

This form of identity could be said to reflect the position of individuals who see themselves as undertaking roles similar to those of others who are attached to a "unified administrative service" (Allen and Newcomb, 1999: 39-40). Such individuals would subscribe to common structures, or "rules and resources" (Giddens, 1991). However, this view takes less account of ways in which an individual might interpret and adapt a role, as opposed to performing it precisely in accordance with pre-determined guidelines. Other approaches to identity allow for the possibility of growth and maturation, so that identity becomes a process of development, or a "project" (Giddens, 1991; Henkel, 2000). The "project" is not only constructed on an ongoing basis, but also involves interaction between the individual and the structures that they encounter, such as a job description or functional location. Thus, identity becomes "Not an essence but a positioning" (Hall, 1990: 5). More recent accounts of academic identity, for instance, take account of such movements (Delanty, 2008; Taylor, 2008).

Furthermore, an approach linking structure and agency, whereby social structures are seen as being both reproduced and transformed through the practices of individuals and groups of individuals, may assist in providing a more dynamic account of identity (Giddens, 1991; Archer, 2000). This takes account of the influence of structures on an individual, and their capacity to modify, change or re-create these. It therefore relates identity to an individual's positioning at any point in time, allowing for the possibility that this may change according to circumstances, so that the individual is positioned:

> "… between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken' " (Hall, 1996: 6).

Thus, distinguishing between active and response modes, between activity that relies on given structures and activity that is more developmental, may assist in providing a more in-depth perspective.

Re-defining professional identities

For the purposes of the project, 'professional staff' were defined as individuals having management roles but not an academic contract, and included:

General managers in faculties, schools and departments, and functional areas such as student services.
Specialist professionals with accredited qualifications such as those in finance and human resources offices.
'Niche' specialists who have developed functions such as research management and quality audit specifically in a higher education context.

The project did not include academic managers such as deans and pro-vice-chancellors, nor staff in teaching and learning, staff development, library and information services roles.

Interviews were conducted with twenty-four respondents in three different types of UK university (multi-faculty, green field and post-1992). The institutions were selected on the basis of their different missions, size, and teaching and research orientations. Respondents included senior and middle grade managers. They worked in a range of functional areas including departmental management, finance, human resources, student support, external relations, planning and enterprise.

It was apparent from the data that some respondents could be distinguished by their approaches to the structural "rules and resources" (Giddens, 1991) that they encountered, and that some demonstrated greater mobility than others. Three categories were developed, as follows:

- *Bounded professionals,* who located themselves within the boundaries of a function or organisational location that they had either constructed for themselves, or which had been imposed upon them. They were, therefore, governed by the "rules and resources" (Giddens, 1991) in that space, and were characterised by the maintenance of processes and structures, and by the performance of roles that were relatively prescribed.

- *Cross-boundary professionals,* who recognised, and actively used boundaries to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity, capitalising on their knowledge of territories on either side of the boundaries that they encountered. They used their understanding of the "rules and resources" of more than one type of space to construct their identity, were likely to display negotiating and political skills, and also to interact with the external environment. As in the case of *bounded professionals*, boundaries were a defining mechanism for them.

- *Unbounded professionals,* who displayed a disregard for boundaries, or for the "rules and resources" which they might represent, having a more open-ended and exploratory approach to the broadly based projects with which they were involved. These people undertook work that contributed to institutional development, drawing on external experience and contacts, and were as likely to see their futures outside higher education as within the sector.

Of the twenty-four individuals interviewed, twelve (50%) were categorised as *bounded,* eight (33%) as *cross-boundary*, and four (17%) as *unbounded*. In reality, however, individuals may be on the border of different forms of identity, or move between these according to circumstances. The typology, therefore, should be regarded as a heuristic device for the purpose of illustrating a disposition towards one identity category rather than another, and as a basis for comparison. There were more senior managers than middle managers in the *bounded* category, and vice versa in the case of the other two categories, although specialist and generalist professionals were more evenly divided:

Category of professional	**Middle Managers**	**Senior Managers**	**Totals**
Bounded	4	8	12
Cross-boundary	5	3	8
Unbounded	3	1	4
Totals	12	12	24

Category of professional	**Specialist eg finance; human resources**	**Generalist eg student services; departmental management**	**Totals**
Bounded	6	6	12
Cross-boundary	3	5	8
Unbounded	2	2	4
Totals	11	13	24

A conceptual framework was subsequently developed to incorporate a second dimension, representing four major aspects of professional activity: spaces, knowledges, relationships and legitimacies. By placing the three types of professional against the four aspects of activity, twelve categories of identity characteristics were developed (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Typology of Professional Identities

Typology of Professional Identities

Activity Dimensions	Characteristics of Bounded Identities	Characteristics of Cross-boundary Identities	Characteristics of Unbounded Identities
Spaces	- trusteeship (knowledge; budgets) - safety (audit; assurance) - prescribed/closed off (processes; systems; regulations) - space used to position/frame identity - 'own' space differentiated from 'other' space - offer a detailed map	Boundaries used as device to: . traverse space . facilitate interpretation between functions . translate functional knowledge into institutional knowledge . offer signposts	- a disregard for boundaries - functional space overlaps and merges - few fixed points - create new activity/knowledge space - accommodate complexity - little differentiation between internal and external space - offer a compass
Knowledges	- process/information-oriented - technical - regulatory - represent fixed core; institutional memory - reflect history; precedent; continuity	- drawn from multiple organisational spaces - cross-functional - applied/'mode 2' knowledge - interpretive; translational - can be politically oriented - can involve negotiated trade-offs	- construct new institutional knowledge - use knowledge/experience from outwith sector - move beyond processes, systems, institution - fluid/provisional approach to knowledge - contextualising - future-oriented
Relationships	- based on service/support - formal, hierarchical - clear distinction between academic and professional roles - strong ties within boundaries of locale - minimal weak ties - potential for 'us' and 'them' positionings	- negotiated across boundaries - politically astute - used to build advantage - opportunistic - strong ties within prime functional area(s) - weak ties to institutional, sector and external networks	- free wheeling; mobile - negotiated on a personal basis - represent nodal points of networks - based on ability to take the part of others - strong ties within project - weak ties to institutional and external networks - minimal weak ties to sector networks
Legitimacies	- provide advice, definition, control - know the answer - provide certainty, reliability, order, continuity - instrumental action - institutional regulation	- interpret, translate, across boundaries - construct institutional alliances - build competitive advantage for own section and the institution - construct a case - negotiate agreement - contribute to ongoing decisions and outcomes - strategic action - institutional capacity building	- investment of personal capital - creativity, originality and innovation - working with uncertainty, provisionality, complexity - maximising human potential - invest in longer-term future - communicative action - institutional development

Bounded professionals

For *bounded professionals,* structures and boundaries provide the defining parameters of their identity. This boundedness may be as a result of an individual's own volition, and/or reflect constraints that are imposed by the institutional environment. *Bounded professionals* tend to represent an "ideal" form of professional (Eraut, 1994) in that they offer measured judgements in accordance with knowledge that is accumulated via professional training and/or experience as a practitioner, and which carries an "aura of certainty" (Eraut, 1994: 15). While at one level, clear identity boundaries appear to offer a secure framework, it can be undermined, for instance, if an individual finds that they have accountabilities in more than one space. For instance, staff who are located in faculties or departments, rather than in the central administration, can find themselves dealing with two sets of "rules and resources" (Giddens, 1991), which pull them in different directions and create conflicting allegiances. One such person said that they felt "open to the elements kind of thing…", illustrating the potential for indeterminacy and tension. This in turn can lead to the adoption of multiple identities, via different professional personae for different sections of an institution (Whitchurch, 2008a). In this situation, individuals can struggle to find their own professional space.

Using Bernstein's (2000) conceptualisation of knowledge boundaries, *bounded professionals* may be said to represent strongly classified, strongly insulated categories and discourses, voluntarily or involuntarily, whereby:

> "the principle of the classification comes to have the force of the natural order and the identities that it constructs are taken as real, as authentic, as integral, as the source of integrity" (Bernstein, 2000: 7).

Because *bounded professionals* derive their "integrity" from the structures in which they are located, this can place them in difficulty when they try to relate to other locales that are also well insulated. *Bounded professionals* are, therefore, unlikely to be involved in negotiating their own position in relation to boundaries, either because they do not wish to, or are unable to do so. Furthermore, because they draw their authority principally from the technical aspects of their roles, within formal frameworks and guidelines, their activity might be categorised as "instrumental" in Habermas' typology of "instrumental", "strategic" and "communicative" action, thus:

> "following technical rules of action and assess the efficiency of an intervention into a complex of circumstances and events" (Habermas, 1984: 285).

In sociological terms, the relationships of *bounded professionals* could be said to consist of "strong ties … of long duration, marked by trust and reciprocity" (Florida, 2002: 276) within the boundaries that they inhabit, with few "weak ties" extended outside this framework (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; quoted in Florida, 2002 (276-277). They, therefore, focus their time and effort on close and regular relationships and have less investment in "weak ties" with professional contacts in extended networks, either across the institution or externally, which would have provided them with opportunities for the exchange of institutional intelligence and professional practice.

Thus, *bounded professionals* can be relied upon to meet the expectations enshrined in their contract of employment, and their expertise is essential to their institutions in ensuring that regulatory and legislative requirements are met, and in providing

continuity of service. However, 'ideal' forms of professionalism can come under strain when unpredictable environments, as described, for instance, by Hassan (2003) and Urry (2003), require adaptability and mobility.

Cross-boundary professionals

Like *bounded professionals, cross-boundary professionals* are conscious of the significance of structures and boundaries, and even dependent on them for their identities, although for different reasons. While *cross-boundary professionals* recognise the significance of boundaries, they do not necessarily regard the space at either side of them as being mutually exclusive, and actively use boundaries to achieve superordinate goals. They are able to hold together multiple identity components, seeing boundaries as opportunities rather than as constraints, and are pragmatic about relinquishing elements of these components if necessary, taking opportunities that arise to invest in alternative spaces, knowledges and relationships.

One manager, for instance, brought together admissions and recruitment as different aspects of the same role, developing market intelligence for the institution that might otherwise have fallen between registry and external relations departments. S/he therefore moved between what s/he saw as administration of the admissions process and making market decisions as a manager. S/he flourished in this dual identity because s/he understood, and was comfortable with, the requirements of both types of space, and did not feel obliged to suppress one in favour of the other:

> "It's a job I've very much enjoyed, because it's not one or the other".

In knowledge terms, s/he was able to offer knowledge relating to admissions procedures, and knowledge relating to the market intelligence about recruitment. Thus, s/he not only maintained the institution's admissions processes, but also contributed to building its capacity, aware that:

> "the universities that do well are the ones that keep an eye on what's happening elsewhere, rather than getting too caught up in what's happening at their own institution".

S/he therefore actively sought out the information that s/he felt was required, internally and externally, to move the institution forward in regional and international markets, rather than simply replicating past admissions policies that focused on school leavers.

Other *cross-boundary professionals* found themselves moving across multiple boundaries, and working with different constituencies, inside and outside the institution. For instance, an information systems manager applied technical expertise to local institutional processes, creating an interactive web environment, which was critical to the realisation of the university's mission of widening participation. S/he also undertook the role of business manager, balancing budgetary implications against the benefits and risks of developments to the system. The identity of this person, therefore, comprised three segments: expertise in information systems (including external networks), knowledge of university processes, and managing what s/he termed "the business environment".

Furthermore, their understanding of different functional areas of the institution can give *cross-boundary professionals* an overview that is politically advantageous, enabling them to build the capacity of their institutions for instance, integrating local

partnership activities and widening participation in a mass higher education market. In so doing they are likely to adopt influencing strategies, in a "purposive-rational manner", reflecting Habermas' "strategic action" orientation (Habermas, 1984: 285-286). In negotiating their position, and interacting with different constituencies across the institution, they are able to overcome the tendency for isolation that can occur for *bounded professionals,* particularly if the latter's boundedness is of their own volition.

Unbounded professionals

Staff characterised as *unbounded professionals* distinguish themselves from *bounded* or *cross-boundary professionals* by their disregard for organisational structures and boundaries, or for their positioning in relation to these. Less mindful of fixed points of reference, they have a flexible and open-ended approach to their activity, working with "problem nets" (Barnett, 1997: 172), and acting as nodal points (Urry, 2003: 9-10) in extended networks (Castells, 2000: 469). In this situation, as one respondent observed, it is possible for a job description to become "what you want it to be really". Rather than entering a political debate, they are more likely to work in an exploratory way with tension, and even conflict, seeking a common basis for understanding by, if necessary, re-conceptualising the space that they and others occupy. They are, therefore, prepared to enter messy, or even dangerous, space that others might avoid, working with, rather than being challenged by, ambiguous conditions.

In this respect, their approach might be said to reflect a "communicative action" orientation (Habermas, 1984: 285), whereby they endeavour to establish a common definition of a situation before deciding on a course of action, which is "oriented to reaching understanding". *Unbounded professionals* are, therefore, more oriented to "coming to an understanding *with* [others]" than "exerting an influence *upon* others" (Habermas, 1984: 286). In working towards "communicative action", they are able to contextualise their knowledge, and relate the needs of individuals to university strategy and to the wider higher education policy environment. In the following instance, this means reconceptualising the human resources function:

> "Personnel is a strategic function. It's not just something that turns over the contracts. It is something that should be on board" (human resources manager).

This manager recognised that the tensions created for heads of department in managing their peers, for instance, in relation to disciplinary problems, might require longer-term, as well as immediate solutions. S/he therefore facilitated a management development programme, which offered lateral space in which problems could be acknowledged and explored safely. S/he was also aware that it was necessary to find a language that would "meet [colleagues] half way, because they [too] have a language of their own, that has been developed culturally". Thus, *unbounded professionals* are characterised by their appreciation of the mindsets of others, taking a diagnostic approach to issues that might not be directly articulated. In Habermas' terminology, they create space in which to establish "common situation definitions" whereby "common conviction" might be achieved (Habermas, 1984: 287).

A freewheeling approach to relationships is further characterised by a lack of status consciousness. Rather than referring to positions or titles in the organisational hierarchy, they tend to identify themselves via broad areas of activity, such as "work[ing] in student support". The "weakly classified" approach of *unbounded professionals* to institutional space and knowledge (Bernstein, 1970: 62), therefore, may assist them not only in developing lateral relationships, but also in developing relationships with colleagues at a higher level of seniority:

> "Relaxed frames … change the nature of authority relationships by increasing the rights of [those lower down the hierarchy]" (Bernstein, 1970: 61).

Thus, although the human resource manager described in the previous paragraph was in a relatively junior position in relation to the heads of department with whom s/he was working, s/he was able to develop communicative space in which to design management development programmes that met their needs.

Nevertheless, *unbounded* ways of working can be risky, both for the individual and for the institution. *Unbounded professionals* are likely to be breaking new ground, and exploring sensitive spaces, without recourse to professional or organisational structures or precedents. They depend on their own constructions of a situation. There may be a risk, therefore, that their projects could become over-extended if insufficient account is taken of factors such as resource constraints, time deadlines, or audit requirements. Thus, a single project could either unbalance an institution's overall activity profile or, conversely, fail, if it were too dependent on an enthusiastic manager who left the institution. Too many *unbounded professionals*, therefore, could become, or be regarded as, a liability.

Concluding summary

Bounded professionals can be summarised primarily in terms of the maintenance of boundaries to ensure continuity of processes and structures; *cross-boundary professionals* by the use of boundaries, and knowledge of space on either side of them, to reinforce institutional capacity on an ongoing basis; and *unbounded professionals* by a disregard for boundaries and a focus on institutional development for the future. While *bounded professionals* might be said to represent Friedson's "standard" group of professionals (Friedson, 2001: 212), undertaking tasks that, although requiring specialised expertise, are geared to "standardised production" that is pre-determined, the other two categories represent different forms of "elite" professional, who apply their expertise to more complex, individuated tasks (Friedson, 2001:111).

While 'ideal' forms of professionalism may offer a sense of collectivity to professional staff in higher education, they do not adequately capture their dynamism as a group, or the new knowledges, relationships and legitimacies that are being constructed in their institutions. These trends would seem to reflect wider movements in the workplace, whereby employers seek "employees with good interpersonal skills who are able to engage in 'rule-making' rather than 'rule-following' behaviour", and are "innovative and creative" rather than "bureaucratic" (Brown and Scase, 1997: 89). Furthermore, professional staff could be said increasingly to represent the "creative class" of professionals (Florida, 2002) who are open to experience, and *unbounded*

professionals, in particular, to be operating more like academic colleagues, facilitating perspectives and understandings that create new forms of institutional knowledge.

The mobility of *cross-boundary* and *unbounded professionals* is facilitated by the exchange of institutional intelligence and professional practice through extended professional networks, which are likely to become an increasingly significant feature of professional life. Both categories have "strong" and "weak" ties within their institutions (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; quoted in Florida, 2002 (276-277)). "Strong ties" are apparent in one-to-one relationships with line managers or other key individuals. *Cross-boundary professionals* also have networks of "weak ties" external to their institutions, inside and outside the higher education sector. In the case of *unbounded professionals*, "weak" ties tend to be to networks outside, rather than inside, the sector.

The study also showed that identities were not uniform across the case institutions. The two institutions that were undergoing significant change, for instance, by developing regional partnerships, had a higher proportion of *cross-boundary* and *unbounded professionals*. The study suggests, therefore, that those institutions that are obliged to respond to changes in their environments, for whatever reason, are more likely to host the new forms of professional described, who work across and beyond boundaries.

Some individuals showed the potential to belong to other categories, although movement between them was likely to depend on the institutional structures that they encountered, as well as on their own agency. For instance, departmental managers, particularly in devolved structures, could become 'locked into' academic departments, with little scope for crossing into the central administration, or to collaborate with peers across departments. They could be involuntarily *bounded*, therefore, and might well be able to become *cross-boundary* if they moved to a more flexible organisational environment. This again demonstrates that professional identities are likely to be contingent upon a combination of what the individual is able to achieve, and has the will to achieve, in their local circumstances. Moreover, a comparison of the three finance directors, two of whom were *bounded* and one *cross-boundary,* demonstrated that it was possible to adopt different approaches to a similar role, although again this was likely to depend on both the individual's predilections and the institutional context within which they were working.

The study, therefore, adds to understandings about what it means to be a professional manager in higher education by bringing into view movements whereby individuals are:

- Developing their identities as a career-long project, rather than defining themselves solely via membership of a pre-defined 'administrative' cadre or professional (although the two aspects are not necessarily mutually exclusive).
- Actively interpreting their roles as well as enacting them in accordance with, for instance, formal structures and job descriptions. In Archer's terms, therefore, they could be said to be "personifying" as well as "animating" their roles (Archer, 2000: 288).
- Moving laterally across functional and organisational boundaries, as well as following a linear career trajectory in order to develop their careers.

Institutions will continue to require professional specialists to deal with increasingly rigorous legislative and audit requirements relating to, for instance, finance, the estate, and equal opportunities, and a proportion of these roles are likely to be filled by *bounded professionals*. However, institutions also require *cross-boundary professionals* to work across internal boundaries and to interpret and contextualise the obligations placed on them to different constituencies. *Unbounded professionals* may be an expanding group who facilitate institutional adaptation to more fluid internal and external environments, as systematic, evidence-based approaches to planning and decision-making become less dependable.

A larger scale, longitudinal study would be required to determine whether, for instance, less *bounded* forms of professional are on the increase. A more detailed account of the implications of these developments for institutions and for individuals, as well as some international comparisons, can be found in Whitchurch (2008b) (forthcoming).

Note: The study described in the paper was carried out with the support of King's College, London, and also of a research grant from the UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, both of which are gratefully acknowledged.

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