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Who Do They Think they Are? The Changing Identities of Professional Administrators and Managers in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

Contemporary universities, serving mass higher education markets, find themselves delivering complex, broadly based projects such as student support and welfare, human resource development, and business enterprise. Established concepts of academic administration and devolved management have been overlaid by more fluid institutional structures and cultures, with a softening of internal and external boundaries (Whitchurch 2004; 2005). These developments have caused major shifts in the identities of professional administrators and managers, as they adopt more project-oriented roles crossing functional and organisational boundaries. This paper considers the dynamics of these changes, in terms that move beyond conventional assumptions about 'administration' and 'management'. While identities have been defined traditionally via structured domains such as professional knowledges, institutional boundaries, and the policy requirements of the higher education sector, an emergent 'project' domain has fostered the development of an increasingly multi-professional grouping of staff, with implications for career futures.

1. CONTEXT

As universities have adopted increasingly complex missions, involving mass higher education, and regional and international markets, their boundaries, internally and externally, have become more fluid. This paper considers the impact of these changes on the roles and identities of professional administrators and managers. It refers to that group of staff in universities comprising academic administrators, generalist managers and accredited specialists, and notes the emergence of hybrid 'multi-professionals', who not only work across boundaries, but also contribute to the formation of new fields of knowledge. It draws on a UK study, in which data was gathered from interviews with twenty four senior and middle grade administrators and managers in three universities.

From an "Academic Civil Service" to Devolved Management

Thirty years ago, a university's supporting infrastructure would have been described as its "academic administration" (Shattock 1970), or "an academic civil service" (Sloman 1964). This description promoted the idea of the disinterested civil servant, who advised on the legal and regulatory aspects of policy and its implementation, providing continuity and upholding standards (Levin 1972). The

academic administration would have attached to it expert functions such as finance, estates and human resources, but there would be little permeability or between it and these more technical areas, or between the technical areas themselves (Whitchurch 2004). There would, also, be a clear boundary between what was seen as ‘the Administration’ and academic activity, whereby the identities of professional and academic staff were clearly distinguished. Strains of this model still exist, particularly in registry and secretariat functions, which are at the heart of academic administration.

The move towards devolved budgetary and planning arrangements has been documented by Clark (1995; 1998). He refers to a “central steering core”, or senior management team, with professional managers out-posted to faculties and schools to stimulate activity in the “academic heartlands”. These staff often have dual lines of accountability, so that some might have a direct line management relationship with a professional colleague in the university centre, and a ‘dotted’ line relationship with an academic manager in the field, such as a Dean. For others the reverse might apply. Under these arrangements, posts that had had the title assistant registrar in an academic administration were translated into business manager posts in schools and faculties, focusing on local planning and budgeting. The devolved organisational model is particularly common in large, multi-faculty institutions.

And the ‘Inside Out’ University

As the world of higher education became more complex, and institutions grappled with the implications of the knowledge and communications revolutions, organisational boundaries became more free-form, both inside the university and between the university and its external environment

The “Inside Out University”

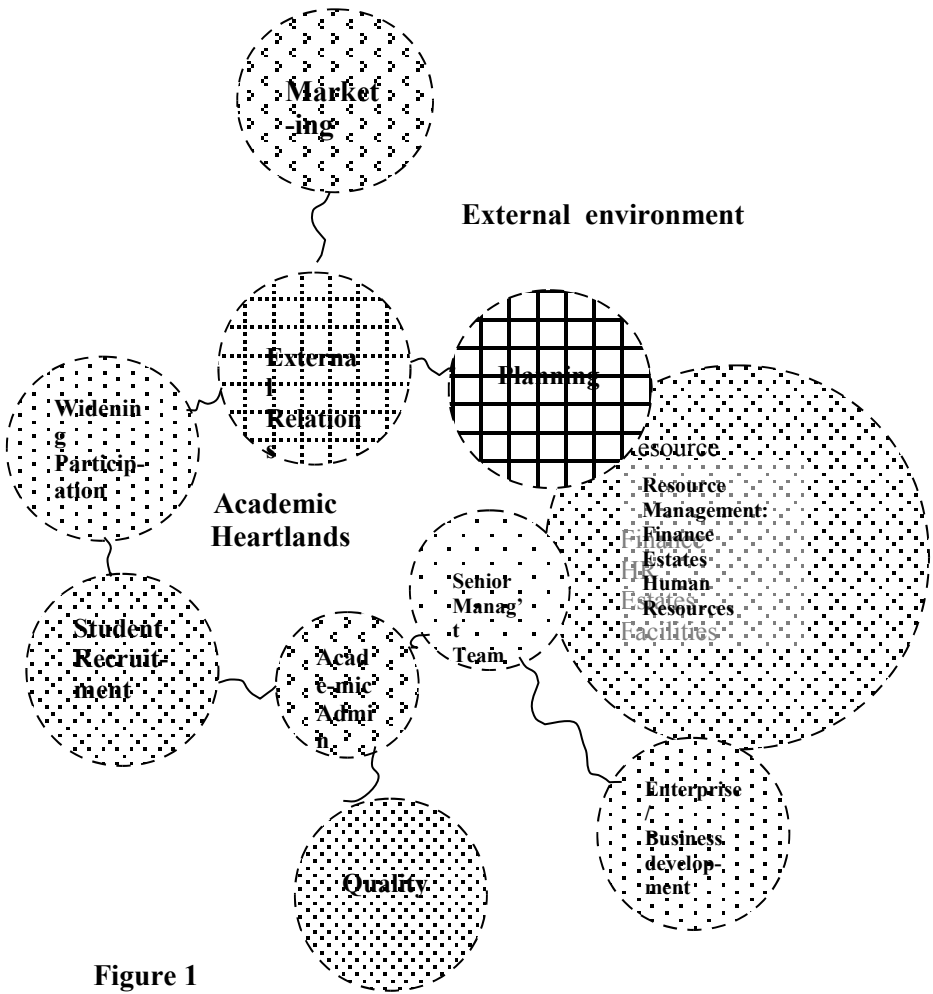


Figure 1

(Barnett 2000). The hierarchical structures of academic administration, and core and periphery models of devolved planning and budgeting, loosened into more fluid relationships between functional areas (Figure 1) (Whitchurch 2004). Academic administration shrank to become one element in much more diverse organisational arrangements, in which resource management played a more dominant role. Like an amoeba, the “Inside Out University” has functional elements that may split, coalesce and modify as needs and circumstances evolve. Universities, therefore, have become increasingly open systems, employing workers on different campuses and even in different countries, for instance, via franchise operations. Decisions, especially in respect of resources, cannot be made by isolating one functional area from another: thus finance, estates and human resources increasingly impinge on one other, and have to be managed as a package. As these functional areas re-form, they offer new voices and identities to professional managers.

Administration, Management and Beyond

Moves away from academic administration, towards devolved management and beyond, made it increasingly difficult to define those groups of staff responsible for delivering university strategy and operations (Rhoades and Sporn 2002; Lambert 2003; Middlehurst 2004; Whitchurch 2005). The boundaries between professional staff, senior academic managers such as pro-vice-chancellors and deans, and other academic staff, have become less clear-cut. For instance, there are precedents for the role of head of administration to be re-titled pro-vice-chancellor (administration), and for appointees to have either academic or professional backgrounds, or a combination of both. Some institutions have adopted the term ‘professional services’ to distinguish staff not having direct academic responsibilities, although this still has ‘service’ connotations. In the UK, the merging of the polytechnics and universities in 1992 has increased the traffic of staff between the two sectors, with the result that a stronger tradition of ‘management’ in the post-1992 universities has had an influence on the pre-1992 universities.

These changes have been reflected in the use of titles, with the term ‘administrator’ being reserved increasingly for staff undertaking clerical or secretarial functions. This is illustrated by a comparison of the handbooks of the annual Conference of University Administrators (CUA) and its successor body, the Association of University Administrators (AUA) in 1985 and in 2005. Between these dates, the percentage of presenters having the title ‘Administrator’, ‘Secretary’, ‘Registrar’ or ‘Officer’ fell as follows:

Administrator: from 13% to 4%
Registrar: from 25% to 13%
Secretary: from 16% to 3%
Officer: from 22% to 14%.

Conversely, those having the title ‘Manager’, ‘Director’ and ‘Head’ rose:

Manager: from 10 % to 21%
Director: from 9% to 19%
Head: from 0% to 11%.

2. NEW FRAMES, NEW IDENTITIES

Emerging Spaces

There has been little acknowledgement, and no comprehensive appraisal, of the re-positioning of professional administrators and managers in UK higher education. The academic literature tends to focus on boundaries and oppositions between professional and academic roles. For instance, Rowland (2002) notes “fault lines” between staff groupings, and others, such as Halsey (1992), Parker and Jary (1995), and Deem (1998), focus on polarities between academic and management agendas. On the other hand, the practitioner literature has raised awareness of a developing skill and knowledge base for professional staff (Holmes 1998; Lauwerys 2002), of a re-valuation of roles (McInnis 1998; Gornall 1999; Conway 2000; Dobson and Conway 2003; Szekeres 2003, 2004), and of local partnership working between academic and professional managers (Hare and Hare 2002; McMaster

2002). However, neither literature has identified the cross-boundary and translational roles being played by professional administrators and managers in delivering broadly-based projects such as student support and welfare, human resource development, and business enterprise, that now characterise universities' operations in local, regional and global settings.

The Four-Domain Model

Using the concepts of “structure” and “agency”, (Giddens 1991; Archer 2000), it is suggested that the identities of professional administrators and managers working in the Sloman (“academic civil service”) or Clark (“core” and “periphery”) models were influenced primarily by the structures in which they found themselves: their home institution, their personal knowledge base, and the higher education sector. These structural domains have been characterised as the *knowledge domain*, the *institutional domain*, and the *sector domain*. These represent the primary structures within which professional administrators and managers operate, including the “rules and resources” (Giddens 1991) on which they draw, such as legal, constitutional and regulatory frames, as well as budgetary and contractual considerations. These three domains, therefore, represent what it is to be a professional administrator or manager in terms of established structures and pathways. Within these structures, this group of staff has, over time, assumed greater personal agency, rather than simply acting out fixed roles in pre-determined job descriptions. This agency draws on the unique contribution that individuals are able to make, building on their particular abilities, world-view and experience.

The emergence of the ‘Inside Out University’ permitted, and indeed required, not only increased agency, but also an ability by professional administrators and managers to work across functional boundaries, and to create new working territories as the need arose. Thus a fourth domain, the *project domain*, represents the emergence of hybrid workers or *multi-professionals* who are not only more proactive within given structures, but are able to traverse inherited practices and fields, to deliver broadly-based projects across the university. In doing this, they construct and renew their identities on a continuous, day-to-day basis. The four domains provide a conceptual frame for understanding the changes that have occurred to professional identities in the contemporary university, both over time and across functional areas.

The Knowledge Domain

The *knowledge domain* represents the knowledge and skill base associated with academic administration, for instance regulatory matters, academic quality and standards, student registration and welfare. It also encompasses the technical expertise associated with accredited specialisms such as finance, human resources and estates management, and niche knowledges, with specific applications in the higher education sector, such as widening participation, community outreach, alumni relations and research spinout. In the ‘academic administration’ model, professional administrators were regarded as the institutional memory and ‘keeper of the conscience’, and much of their value lay in their ability to provide historical continuity and to quote precedent. Moves towards the distribution of management responsibilities in devolved institutional structures led to a shift of emphasis from professional administrators and managers as recorders and guardians of information, to professionals who are producers and managers of knowledge, for instance, market intelligence about student recruitment, or about new players in regional development initiatives. This movement reflects broader trends in the working environment, whereby professionals increasingly trade in the information needs of global markets (Gibbons et al 1994; Fuller 2002; Little, Quintas and Ray 2002; Newell, Robertson, Scarborough and Swan 2002; Tsoukas 2005). They are expected to be capable of interrogating as well as of storing and retrieving information. The translation of these knowledges for institutional purposes becomes increasingly sophisticated in situations of ever-narrowing margins for error, and can be critical to an institution’s positioning in the sector. Thus, as well as storing and reproducing information, professional administrators and managers actively create new bases of knowledge and understanding that will inform the evolution of institutional identities.

The Institutional Domain

The *institutional domain* brings together the academic and organisational agendas that shape the cultures and missions of individual institutions. While academic agendas centre on the fulfilment of teaching and research programmes, organisational agendas provide the operating structures and

systems that facilitate these activities, enabling them to be contextualised against external constraints and opportunities. The relationship between the two agendas is a dynamic one, and the positioning of professional administrators and managers around these impacts on their identity, and on how they are perceived by others. These positionings might include, for instance, a support role in providing technical information for a funding bid; a professional role in judging the longer-term value of an improved RAE rating against short-term damage to the bottom line; or involvement in a political debate about, for instance, the closure of an academic department.

In the study, professional staff in a multi-faculty institution with a devolved management structure tended to see themselves in terms of their location, either in the corporate centre or in academic departments, and there were relatively clear perimeters around functional territories. While those at the centre regarded themselves as professional managers, those at the periphery tended to define themselves as academic administrators. At a campus university, with a traditionally-based academic administration and well-integrated working relationships between academic and professional staff, more fluid structures had evolved, as individuals moved across interlinking areas such as student recruitment and external relations. At a post-1992 university, the management function was strongly centralised, and the delivery of increased student numbers relied heavily on the professionalisation of data management systems. Managers had a strong task orientation, and there was less evidence of an academic administration. The opportunity to exercise personal agency, and the adoption of cross-boundary roles, therefore, would appear to depend on the institution in which an individual is located, and on their position within its structure, as well as on personal aspirations and abilities.

The Sector Domain

The allegiance of professional administrators and managers to the *sector domain* as a locale varies according to whether they have other affiliations, such as membership of a specialist accrediting body. Thus, a finance director might define him- or herself primarily as an accountant, rather than as a higher education manager, especially if they expect their qualification to enable them to move outside the sector. On the other hand, academic administrators and niche professionals (those developing specialist knowledge within higher education, such as widening participation), as well as some specialist professionals, might seek to develop a career path within the same or another institution, regarding the sector as their professional home. The career grades provided by the “academic civil service” structure facilitated this, by offering a linear trajectory from administrative assistant, to assistant and senior assistant registrar posts, onward to academic registrar and registrar. On the one hand, the movement and re-alignment of professional functions has facilitated a greater permeability between the higher education sector and other work locales. On the other hand, the increased internal complexity of institutions, as they manage multiple and overlapping projects, has fostered the emergence of higher education as a ‘project’ in its own right, requiring dedicated expertise with respect to, for instance, the implications of government funding regimes, student choice, and local and global interfaces.

At the same time, a professionalisation process has occurred, recognising that “the cult of the gifted amateur” (Middlehurst 1993) no longer provides sufficient consistency, in terms of reliability and standards, to underpin the diverse activities that characterise the contemporary university. In support of this professionalisation process, the Association of University Administrators (AUA), and other groupings in the UK offering membership to, for instance, specialists in external relations, admissions, schools liaison, and quality, seek to develop good practice. Many offer career mentoring and training to their members, such as the AUA Postgraduate Certificate programme. They also promote shared standards and values, for instance, through the AUA Code of Standards (Skinner 2001). These groupings, therefore, provide lateral networks, to which people can belong on an *ad personam* basis, rather than as representatives of their institutions, offering them the opportunity for professional exchange and advice outside their immediate circle of colleagues. Membership of such groups, therefore, offers another zone of belonging, providing alternative collective identities to those offered by the *institutional domain*.

3. THE PROJECT DOMAIN

Functional Territories Re-formed

Greater permeability across the internal and external boundaries of institutions has facilitated the emergence of the *project domain* as a distinctive territory in its own right. It is characterised by major, multi-functional projects that have assembled across the university, building on what were previously clearly bounded processes and activities, for instance:

The student support project. The professionalisation of the student support function in higher education has taken place alongside widening participation, the introduction of disability and equal opportunities legislation, and the shift of financial responsibilities from the state to the student. Whereas pastoral needs were dealt with hitherto on a by exception basis, and incorporated within academic tutor roles, in the contemporary university the student support office increasingly provides professional front-line assistance. In one institution, this had involved a transfer of responsibilities from an academic manager to a professional manager. Thus, the latter's role had become a hybrid one, involving administration (of hardship funds), management (of staff and resources), and the delivery of pastoral care and welfare. It included giving introductory talks to welcome new students to the university and advice to students in difficulty; functions that previously might have been the exclusive preserve of academic tutors. In terms of the wider higher education environment, these more professionalised arrangements can be seen as a response to the increasingly complex student requirements of mass higher education and widening participation.

The human resources project. Another major project encompasses human resource development, combining the operational aspects of personnel work, such as recruitment, contracts and employment legislation, with a management development function. The latter might include, for instance, designing programmes for academic managers, such as heads of department, to reinforce management capability and to provide succession planning. The two roles are often symbiotic, bringing together corporate and academic strategy with the career development of individuals, thereby building a new, composite territory. As one human resources officer noted:

“issues on the personnel side often need some management development intervention for a solution.”

Thus, a management development programme might take place alongside a reconfiguration of head of department roles with the aim of establishing posts whose incumbents would manage, rather than simply co-ordinate, the activity of departments. A human resources manager who acted as facilitator in this process would not only be modifying their own identity, by operating at the interface of personnel and management development functions, but would also become involved with the identity movements of heads of department, offering them new frames for dealing with colleagues. Set in a broader context, the human resources project supports the move to more distributed forms of management and leadership in the large and complex institutions created by a mass higher education system, and the devolved planning and budgetary responsibilities adopted by many of them.

The business enterprise project. As institutions entered into new business partnerships, the enterprise project expanded and diversified, and business managers were appointed to stake out this new terrain. Discrete areas such as research, enterprise and regional partnership were re-grouped, creating new streams of activity, described in job descriptions as, for instance, knowledge transfer, innovation, consultancy and spin out. Individuals who were able to synthesise academic and business agendas acted as catalysts for the exploitation of research for commercial purposes. A typical enterprise manager would be at the centre of a communication web, working with directors of research, academic staff and external partners, developing understandings between them:

“I educate them about research, as they educate me about... our engagements with business, the community and other social entities, the regeneration agenda... and all of that stuff.”

This project is at the heart of that part of the university's mission relating to the economy and regional development. It reinforces the university's positioning in the community, as well as promoting understanding about the exchange value of its research offerings. Thus, an enterprise manager, as well as growing their own identity across the various strands of the project, would also be contributing to the maturation of their institution's identity in this developing area.

The Emergence of *Multi-Professionals*

The *project domain* is exemplified by a group of professionals for whom organisational and professional structures are less prominent as an expression of their identity than, for instance, the ability to interface with a multiplicity of tasks and people. One third of the managers in the study were identified as displaying the characteristics of *multi-professionals*, all of them in middle management roles. As they assisted in the delivery of the kind of broadly-based projects outlined above, they demonstrated:

A facility for boundary crossing. *Multi-professionals* display a spatial awareness that takes them outside functional silos. Rather than being protectionist about particular knowledge territories, they seek to re-work these in collaboration with colleagues in contiguous areas, reflecting the concept of “polycontextuality” and “boundary crossing” (Engestrom, Engestrom and Karkkainen 1995). Hence, from a manager spanning student recruitment and external relations:

“Things work best when you have a working knowledge of other areas... it’s important to know about funding arrangements for students, because if you’re going out to recruit, that’s often the question you’re going to be asked”.

As they move across zones of activity, taking cognisance of the relationship between, for instance, student progress and pastoral welfare, or research assessment and innovation spin out, they work amid a plurality of interfaces. They are not discomforted by a lack of containment, displaying a willingness to go back to first principles where necessary, undeterred by custom, practice or precedent. If they have a job description, it is likely to require constant updating, as the boundaries of their projects continuously re-form.

A lack of status consciousness. A noticeable characteristic of *multi-professionals* is their lack of pretension or status consciousness. Rather than referring to organograms, job titles, or organisational hierarchies, they base their identity on a commitment to their projects. Despite an involvement with the general professionalisation process within the sector, there was even some equivocation among subjects in the study about being described as ‘professional’, a term which they felt could imply elitism, setting one group of workers apart from others, rather than fostering a sense of common purpose:

“The word professional suggests that [other people] aren’t professional... there’s a kind of quality implied, which isn’t right actually...”

In rejecting functional hierarchies and categories, these individuals saw themselves as operating on a level playing field, having equivalence with co-workers on the task in hand. A lack of concern about formal status enabled them to place greater emphasis on personal contact than on the adoption of a public, or ‘professional’ persona.

An awareness of organisational cultures. Following on from their rejection of boundaries and hierarchies, *multi-professionals* place as much, if not more, emphasis on the cultures of their institutions as on management structures. Rather than seeing themselves in a straight ‘service’ role, they are more likely to reflect upon how they might work within these cultures to facilitate organisational learning and development, to generate an atmosphere in which academic colleagues “feel more empowered to do more different things”. To this end, they perform a task of diagnosis and preparation, as well as of implementation:

“Some rigorous cultural self-analysis needs to go on ... We’re not ploughing the ground, we’re not sowing the seeds, we’re not watering the ground, we’re kind of gathering up stones first...”

As part of this facilitation, *multi-professionals* display a nurturing role, both in respect of their teams and other colleagues across the communities in which they work, rather than the imposing rules and procedures as a means of empowering others to contribute to institutional goals:

“You don’t just sit on the end of the phone and tell them to do this, do that ... you coach them through it”.

An interpretive role. A sensitivity to cultures enables *multi-professionals* to develop an awareness of the different languages spoken in the university, around the multiple agendas of, for instance, teaching

and research, internationalisation, regional development, widening participation, and market positioning. They recognise the need to “meet [colleagues] half way, because they [too] have a language of their own, that has been developed culturally”. This ability to translate between languages, across the boundaries of activities, is critical to the delivery of their large scale, multi-functional projects. Thus, they are well placed to act as pathfinders within contemporary institutional frameworks, in which management and leadership are increasingly distributed across hierarchies and functions.

4. CONCLUSION

As university boundaries have become more permeable, and institutions have taken cognisance of wide-ranging projects such as student support and welfare, human resource development, and business enterprise, increasingly multi-professional approaches are required to deliver these projects. Multi-professional staff have established themselves as hybrid workers, crossing functional areas, and developing of new fields of knowledge. Thus, the *project domain*, which gives professional administrators and managers the space to operate at the interstices of increasingly complex institutions, is allowing them to move into new territories, taking them beyond the confines of the ‘management or administration?’ debate.

The broadening out of professional identities, from roles that are defined solely by, for instance, regulatory or business processes, has implications for career futures. Staff may expect and seek greater career mobility. Institutions will wish to consider the optimal balance of professional staff as between, for instance, generalist, specialist and more project-oriented management roles, how staff with potential might be retained, and what development opportunities might be made available for them. Individuals will, in turn, wish to consider how they might utilise opportunities such as formal training and qualifications, mentoring, secondments and exchanges to fulfil their particular aspirations and career directions, in an increasingly fluid higher education environment.

Notes:

- i. The author wishes to acknowledge the support of King's College London in her undertaking of the research project referred to in this paper.*
- ii. The paper originated as a presentation to the Conference of the Association of Tertiary Education Managers, 28 to 30 September 2005, Perth, Australia.*

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