

Reconstructing Relationships in Higher Education: Challenging Agendas

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In loving memory of Jane Gordon

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Preface

This monograph builds on and updates material in *Academic and Professional Staff in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce* (Gordon and Whitchurch 2010), to consider developments that have occurred since then, both in the UK and worldwide. It also draws on the empirical studies associated with a report for the UK Leadership

Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE), *Staffing Models and Institutional Flexibility* (Whitchurch and Gordon 2013), and a report for the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA), *Shifting Landscapes: Meeting the Staff Development Needs of the Changing Academic Workforce* (Locke, Whitchurch, Smith and Mazonod 2016). Although both projects were primarily UK based, both sought the views of international expert witnesses and commentators. These accounts, together with a reading of the international literature, has allowed an overview to be taken which is likely to have resonance in other countries, in particular the US, Australasia and South Africa.

Both studies looked at organisational structures, models and strategies, but also included qualitative narratives that give an insight into the hidden worlds of an increasingly diversified workforce, including those working on short-term and part-time contracts, those formally or informally restricted to teaching and/or research, and those undertaking roles with academic components but not necessarily having academic contracts. At the heart of this monograph are the dynamics of working relationships between senior management teams (or in US terms, senior administrators), local managers, rank-and-file faculty and their peer networks. Such relationships appear to be increasingly significant in ensuring that all these groups are committed to institutional missions at the same time as fulfilling their own personal and career aspirations.

It is intended that the text will be of interest to both academic researchers and practising managers interested in higher education roles and identities, careers and working patterns, as well as in institutional organisation and management. To address an international readership, the term 'academic faculty' has been used throughout to refer to what in the UK would be termed 'academic staff'. Where there is reference to 'managers', these may be senior academic managers such as vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors in UK or Australian terminology, presidents and vice-presidents (who would be termed 'administrators' in US terminology). 'Local' managers refers to those in line management positions, which can include academic faculty such as deans, heads of school or department. Within schools and departments it can also include those with, for instance, responsibilities for teaching and learning, educational technology and knowledge exchange. It has also been seen as important to include individuals working in so-called academic 'support' roles, in areas such as student welfare, widening participation, outreach and community partnership, employability, programme design and academic literacy. Although such individuals may or may not have academic contracts, their interface with those who do is increasingly critical for managing teaching and research. People not having academic

contracts are sometimes referred to generically as 'professional' staff. However this is not intended to imply that academic faculty are not also professionals. On occasion the generic term 'staff' is also used to refer collectively to all these groupings. In the UK this does not have the restricted connotations that it has, for instance, in the United States, where it tends to imply individuals having neither academic nor professional contracts ie those in technical or clerical roles. Thus although this monograph is principally about academic faculty, there are occasions when reference will be made to the implications of institutional policy for relationships with professional and other staff. Similarly, the terms 'school' and 'department' are used to denote sub-units in the academic organisation of an institution. The term 'faculty', as used in the UK to mean a disciplinary grouping in the organisational sense has not been used, so as to avoid confusion with its use in relation to academic faculty.

Grateful acknowledgements are due to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) for funding the projects on which this monograph draws; to participants on the University College London Institute of Education MBA in Higher Education Management for stimulating discussions about the realities of day-to-day working relationships; and to the project team for the HEA project, William Locke, Dr Holly Smith and Dr Anna Mazonod. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Professors Rob Cuthbert, Jeroen Huisman and Jenni Case who kindly read and commented on an advanced draft of the text.

Chapter 8: Reconstructing relationships

It was apparent from the studies that the reconstruction of relationships was an iterative process, involving articulation of needs and aspirations by rank-and-file faculty and listening skills by both middle managers and senior management teams. Some changes were happening incrementally, almost by default, becoming incorporated locally as part of implicit agreements, and then being formally rationalised into policy *post hoc*, with policy moving forward on that basis. This process has been accelerated by a more diverse workforce than even a decade ago, including, for instance, those in professional practice subjects, professional staff working on academically-oriented agendas, and individuals on segmented contracts that might, formally at least, focus exclusively on teaching, research or knowledge exchange. This has also led to a broader range of contracts, rewards and incentives, career paths and professional development requirements. Many of these requirements are managed via annual review processes and informal conversations over time, along with opportunities for development. Acknowledgement and recognition of individual circumstances are a key element in building and sustaining positive relationships, which in turn enable policy renewal, even if the action it is possible to take at any point in time represents a step towards, rather than the precise achievement, of a goal. This chapter considers examples of good practice of building relationships via such an iterative approach.

Constructing facilitative relationships

The narratives in the two studies suggest that increased regulation within the sector, together with greater codification of institutional policy around working conditions, has generated a stronger requirement for their flexible interpretation at local level, and that this is likely to be underpinned by implicit understandings which oil the wheels of day-to-day activity. Thus:

We don't prescribe a kind of flexi-working policy. We very much leave it to individual departments to work within their own guidelines... we don't have a formal home working policy, deliberately so, because once you make it formal then you have to enter all kinds of constraining contractual features (director of human resources).

The most effective examples of good practice demonstrate institutions being facilitative in relation to, for instance, progression and careers, rewards and incentives, workloads and performance review, without being overly prescriptive. At the heart of this is the creation of discretionary

space that allows individuals to understand and realise their potential, for instance carving out their own niche within a local context. In some cases individuals may find in this discretionary space some of the freedom they may feel they have lost in a more performance-driven environment. In some institutions this appeared to be managed within formal structures in which the majority of staff were expected to undertake both teaching and research:

[Teaching-only contracts haven't] happened yet but you can, without changing your contract, because of the three elements within it, you can negotiate what percentage of each element you do. So if you really wanted to focus on teaching, you could rack up your teaching hours and reduce your research hours, for example. If you really wanted to work in research, you could do the same, and if you wanted to work in enterprise you could do the same, as long as the needs of the school or the department were met... So we don't need different contracts in that sense because there's flexibility there... (late career faculty).

There were also examples of individuals finding such discretionary space themselves. For instance, in another institution, one member of academic faculty with a teaching-only contract suggested that this form of contract liberated them to undertake the type of research they wanted to undertake, in a way that they wished to do it:

A lot of my research is theoretical, so my papers take a long time and ... when I do produce something I'm proud of what I've done... I want it to be something that I feel I really am proud of and happy with, as opposed to I have to hit certain target journals and go with the pressures of the REF [Research Evaluation Framework]... just because you have to jump through hoops, and I'm not particularly happy with that. So I love the fact of being able to produce what I can (mid-career, teaching-only faculty).

Another institution, that appeared to have arrangements that were pliant in relation to individual working patterns and interests, had a vision whereby individuals could focus on different activities as different stages of their career, rather than trying undertake everything at the same time:

I think where we're wanting to see things move in future is actually to start blurring some of those boundaries [between teaching and research]... I think that there's more merit in... having an [overarching] academic progression route, and you might be on the teaching end of the spectrum at one point in your career, and you might move a little bit more over to one side or the other side of it,

or you might duck out, or you might get recognised just for one part of it... (director of human resources).

This would appear to represent a new way of thinking about a career in its totality rather than requiring a complete alignment of teaching and research at any one time, or prejudicing an individual's future by penalising an emphasis on a specific activity for a defined period.

Taking this longer view might require a strong measure of trust, but would appear to be motivating for individuals, and could be agreed as part of the annual review process. Although there is inevitably an iteration between generic criteria for promotion and progression and rewards for innovative or specific contributions, it would appear that there could be some malleability around this, and local managers would be likely to make such judgements and recommendations. The same manager went on to describe how local managers needed to understand this, and described the process as 'creative friction':

...we need to expect [some] bumpiness and be confident that that's okay, we're comfortable with that but we'll learn from it... we'll build the skill base, build the resilience, build the understanding from our managers and that, in time, should reflect better in the way we reward people (director of human resources).

This reflects the delicate balance between mechanisms that reward for work done and those that motivate for the future, and the difference between the two. Ultimately, although discretionary awards may provide a short-term 'feel good' factor, career progression would appear to be more empowering to the individual. This may also reflect a difference between those who are primarily intrinsically motivated, those who are pragmatic, and/or those who are proactive and instrumental in pursuing their goals.

The link between relationships with mentors and line managers, an individual's professional and intellectual development, and annual review and reward mechanisms is shown clearly in the following:

There is a mentoring scheme, there is appraisal, [and] we are all, as members of staff, attached to a kind of research adviser and... there's a kind of formal thing which is appraisal where this gets talked about, there's a formalised departmental thing about research, which is really seen as an intellectual thing, but obviously your intellectual development is keyed into your professional development, your promotion etc... It's all quite light touch but I don't think that makes it insubstantial (mid-career faculty).

A concept that recurred among both senior and middle managers was that of managing expectations, for example in relation to the introduction of teaching and scholarship, as opposed to teaching and research, as a recognised career and progression route. One middle manager described this as a significant 'culture change' which could only become embedded over time as individuals went through the system, demonstrating that it worked in practice. Management of change issues also came into play, for example the creation of 'job families' as a technique to create a 'mixed economy' in relation to career paths. Another manager spoke of 'helping people understand their role and how they fit in', particularly in a team environment, thus making a positive investment in facilitating relationships, rather than necessarily expecting them to work by themselves. Team rewards were another mechanism for fostering peer relationships.

The two studies suggested, therefore, that the relationship between institution and individual involves a combination of the institution offering rewards, incentives and development programmes, and the agency of individuals in accessing them. This is an iterative relationship and where it works well there is recognition by individuals that there is an onus on them to take and even generate opportunities, using informal relationships and networks as well as formal organisational channels. The existence of dialogue, formal and informal, is likely to be a critical success factor, though that is not to say that access to opportunity should not be fair and transparent, and engender perceptions of equity. At the same time, in practice, some institutions and institutional segments attracted higher levels of earnings from, for instance, consultancy fees, research income and overheads, allowing more scope for individual rewards.

The listening institution - a case example

An iterative process in building constructive relationships was illustrated by an institution with what appeared from the narratives to be a well-supported group of staff who took advantage of what was available to them. There was a sense that the individual should be in the driving seat rather than the institution, allowing them to be proactive in seeking what they needed at any point in time:

...there is a big push if you like to recognise the individual's responsibilities for initiative and taking forward things, leading their own path, if you like, rather than tramlines (academic developer).

The university had therefore integrated the development of management, leadership and professional skills for the spectrum of activities that might

be expected of faculty associated with teaching and research at different levels:

...we're looking at transition between roles and the support that's needed for different roles and responsibilities, so we have in place a leadership and management suite [of programmes], which has mixed academic and professional services staff on it, to reflect the different roles that the groups are doing at any one point..., so there's interaction there (academic developer).

From the university's point of view, achieving 'buy-in' for a development programme that could be internalised by individuals was seen as critical. Younger faculty were engaged by tying this into probation procedures. Thus:

...it's not saying, 'These are your options,' it's saying, 'What do you need, what do you want? And can we deliver that?... we're looking at self-assessment diagnostics at the point of entry, so that we can then tailor development support for an individual... even more... like a 'playlist' if you like, of development that you might want to sequence over a period of time... that's helped bridge that gap between what an institution needs and the way we can put it in place (academic developer).

Being able to appreciate the practical aspects of what was intended as a comprehensive programme, and having confidence that this longer-term process would ultimately extend deep into the institution, was expected to have greater impact on individual expectations and institutional culture than one that was driven by, for instance, simply collecting attendance data:

...there is a wealth of support available once you start to access it and identify that you want it. But that motivation varies for different people and different times in careers when people may seek something out, and there isn't necessarily a pattern for that (academic developer).

At the same time the institution was trying to reduce stressors that impacted on academic faculty, for instance, multiple requests for the same information for different purposes, such as staff review, teaching loads and research assessment:

... we're trying to tackle this on a number of fronts; on the psychological front we're trying to increase people's resilience, we're trying to help people manage workloads by improving processes and cutting bureaucracy... We now have five or six or seven separate processes, forms, all of which are duplicating the

same information... So we're... looking at ways of helping people to cut through that... (director of human resources).

Less formal measures at local level, often involving a combination of mutual support and self-help, were particularly valued by individuals, especially if this was provided in response to a specific need and at an appropriate moment in time. It was clear that optimal value was more likely to be achieved if development programmes were closely tailored to individual needs, with provision of targeted support. Otherwise, as several respondents noted, it could become a bureaucratic requirement in order to demonstrate credibility and proceed to the next stage of a career. In practice, such matching was likely to require discussion and provision of appropriate opportunities supported by local managers, even though this may be initiated by the individual:

... what I'd like to put in for this term is to have maybe monthly drop-in sessions where myself and maybe the director of research, anyone can come and just have a discussion of what's going well and what isn't and then we can maybe decide what training people need, based on those discussions, so have a more informal group. Because a lot of training tends to get thrown at new staff at the wrong times actually and it's not quite the training or the timing that's needed... I think if we let them drive it that would be something really helpful (head of school).

It was further suggested that development programmes that were designed to promote self-reflection could also instil confidence, which could often be an issue, particularly with women:

I do think... getting staff to actually reflect... at an early stage, then they take that through with them and they are more likely to engage with pedagogy and be interested... I think it's good for their self-esteem as well, actually to reflect on what they've done (head of school).

Individual departments were also encouraged to develop collective initiatives in relation to, for instance, attracting research funding:

... [one] department have decided to go for a sort of model where they don't do lots of individual grant applications, they decided on a kind of thematic basis as a department what they will be doing. They get a range of colleagues involved in it and they've been very successful in developing that sort of model, and... it's clearly very helpful for younger colleagues who might not have the standing or whatever yet, to get the necessary grants (pro-vice-chancellor, education).

In turn, respondents valued opportunities made available to participate in cross-university activities and development initiatives in order to pick up information, learn from others and develop good practice. Others felt it had been important to establish a niche role, such as being the 'go to' person in their discipline for ethics advice or schools engagement.

Typology of relationships

Table 11 categorises the types of relationships and interactions arising from the narratives between rank-and-file faculty and their institution, their line managers and peer groups, and the activities that characterise these. *Obligatory relationships* are those that are required to maintain legal and regulatory aspects of the employment contract. These may be regarded as constraining, but they also protect the individual in relation to, for instance, terms and conditions of employment and considerations of equity. *Discretionary relationships* are those that are likely to involve local managers in interpreting and facilitating the formal employment contract in ways that play to local circumstances and incentivise individual faculty. An important aspect of this is communication, face-to-face, online and via social media. Support networks may also develop among peers, and can create bottom-up pressure and influence. *Voluntary relationships* are those that are likely to be more personal and social in nature, based on mutual interests, both on and off campus, and may be seen as particularly useful for building social capital. Both *discretionary* and *voluntary* relationships allow, in differing degrees, autonomy and choice on the part of the individual.

<i>Key players with whom individual faculty may interact</i>	<i>Obligatory relationships</i>	<i>Discretionary relationships</i>	<i>Voluntary relationships</i>
Institution/senior management team	Eg Fulfilment of contracts Maintaining appropriate reward and recognition system Maintaining appropriate performance/promotion criteria	Eg All staff meetings Senior staff blogs/social media Civic and regional engagement events	Eg Social - annual all staff party Internal prize and fellowship events

Middle managers (eg deans, heads of school/department, programme/team leaders, line managers)	Eg Work allocation to individuals and teams Annual review of faculty Departmental and programme meetings	Eg Career counselling/advice Provision of career development opportunities Manager blogs/social media Town and gown/community events	Eg Social - coffee, lunch, informal gatherings Sport/the arts, on and off campus Local memberships and civic events
Mentors/peers/networks	Eg Work-based team meetings Regular meetings with mentors	Eg Sharing of information/good practice/advice Membership of disciplinary/professional body and/or network Blogs/social media	Eg Social - coffee, lunch Sport, the arts, wellbeing on and off campus Social media Local memberships and civic events

Table 11: Faculty working relationships

The categories are intended to represent a continuum rather than being tightly bounded, and the activities in them to offer examples. They are not mutually exclusive and individuals are likely to be involved in all three types of relationships, accommodating to and adjusting these on the day-to-day basis. In particular, some activities may move between the discretionary and voluntary categories according to the context in which they take place. The table is therefore intended as an illustration of what appears to be happening from the narratives, that there is an ongoing shift whereby activities undertaken as part of the involuntary and formal relationship between an institution and its staff are increasingly counterbalanced by those taking place towards the discretionary and voluntary end of the spectrum. Relationships are no longer entirely constrained by structures, and may be becoming less so. Rather than being based solely on a quantification of hours spent on specific activities, the relationship with faculty is increasingly likely to be reinforced by bespoke, often local, agreements.

How far formal relationships might be informed and influenced by local relationships is likely to depend on the receptiveness and responsiveness of the institution, its senior management team and local managers, as well as the interpretive and negotiating skills of individual managers. The success of negotiations may well depend on the conjunction of time and space and other contextual factors, including relationships that are forged informally. Within the discretionary and voluntary categories might be located the increasing reciprocity that exists in relation to, for instance, undertaking activities that do not 'count' in workload models, such as

internal and external examining; chairing of committees, examination boards and vivas; internal reading of theses; and doctoral upgrades.

A 'favour' economy depends on mutuality and the building of social capital, for instance, if I do you a favour by acting as internal reader for your student's thesis, I can ask you at a later date to read my student's thesis. However, one of the results of a more marketised and regulated environment within institutions is that while such roles have traditionally been accepted as part of academic life, they may increasingly be subject to an individual cost benefit analysis and calculation of reciprocity. Thus it could also be argued that in current environments such favours may shift from being 'discretionary' (as part of a 'collegial' or common culture) to being 'voluntary' (as part of a calculation of something for something). A 'favour' economy may also be hidden, alongside implicit understandings about mutual but informal rewards, incentives and reciprocities, and is distinguished from a 'prestige' economy (Blackmore and Kandiko 2012) and a 'gift' economy (Macfarlane 2015) by the expectation of reciprocity as a result of building social capital. Another example is the fact that some individuals having teaching-only contracts undertake research in their own time, either unfunded or locally funded, and research-only faculty undertake some teaching to build their portfolio, with the tacit agreement of local managers and colleagues who might perceive advantage in this for the department. These activities might well not feature in a formal annual review, but could be used in a curriculum vitae for future advancement. The notion of investment also comes into play, on a spectrum of being calculated or speculative, within relationships that may be open-ended on the basis of ongoing reciprocity, or restricted to a specific area of interest. Thus although such relationships may be facilitative and mutually beneficial, they may also acquire a perceived value based on, for instance, the prestige and visibility associated with the relationship, and exchange value in relation to the 'gift' of an opportunity such as attendance at a conference. Discretionary and voluntary relationships might therefore be said to represent part of a hidden, 'soft' economy on which institutions increasingly depend.

Building on the idea of *obligatory*, *discretionary* and *voluntary* relationships, it is possible to identify approaches that are *instrumental* or *investing*, either at an institutional or individual level. These are summarised in Table 12:

<p>Institutional/Instrumental Contracts of employment Workload models Transactional arrangements eg shared services/ outsourcing contracts</p>	<p>Institutional/Investing Flexible employment packages Community partnerships and networks Developmental activity (mentoring, conferences, attachments...)</p>
<p>Individual/Instrumental Fulfilling obligations 'Good enough'/satisficing performance Focus on activities likely to bring tangible reward such as funding</p>	<p>Individual/Investing Working outside formal hours Focus on activities of intrinsic interest and/or involving innovation with uncertain outcomes Internal and external networking</p>

Table 12: Instrumental and investing relationships

Instrumental relationships involve a clear *quid pro quo* with pre-defined outcomes and rewards, likely to be reflected in contractual agreements. In the case of individuals, they may involve meeting obligations with good enough performance, for instance restricting the amount of teaching undertaken in order to focus on achieving excellent research if this is seen as more likely to lead to career progression, thus fulfilling the requirements of a workload model but not going the extra mile with students. In relation to institutions, *instrumental* relationships are likely to lead to transactional partnerships that get the job done as efficiently as possible in areas of activity which are seen as discrete and clear cut. They are therefore likely to be measured and calculated. Such relationships are reflected in, for instance, outsourcing and the adoption of a private sector approach. However, it may also be that increasing numbers of part-time staff on teaching focused contracts may engender relationships that tend to be at the instrumental rather than investing end of the spectrum.

Investing relationships are likely to require trust, negotiation and indeed some faith. For the individual this may mean taking opportunities when it is not always clear what they may lead to, and for institutions it may mean taking a chance on initiatives and partnerships that may bring mutual benefits, which again cannot be predicted precisely. For both, networks are likely to be built, extended and valued, a process that has been both facilitated and stimulated in contemporary environments by online relationships. For the individual, an investing relationship offers a degree of autonomy and freedom, for instance to seek new contacts and develop partnerships that might translate into funding and publications, and so is optimistic in tenor. In this sense they might be seen as being liberating and as adding value. There may also be a difference between team

working that emerges voluntarily and as a matter of choice, and team working that is imposed, for instance by the merger of a department.

Linking back to the structural models of institutional approaches to managing faculty, described in Chapter 3, *investing* relationships would be more likely to occur in the *integrated* approach, with *instrumental* relationships more likely to characterise *private sector* approaches, and *partnership* approaches to engender a mix of the two, depending on the extent of pragmatic considerations, and of voluntarism in individual contributions. In general terms, more pliable policies and structures, for instance job descriptions that are not over-specific, are more likely to encourage *investing* relationships, although individual situations at any point in time are likely to involve a balance between the two. In turn, *investing* relationships may have an influence on policies and structures so that they become more facilitative. Nevertheless *instrumental* relationships are necessary to maintain contractual obligations on both sides, and also in relation to considerations of fairness and equity. Maintaining an appropriate balance offers a further perspective for managers on their portfolio of responsibilities.

Conclusion

The studies suggest that, whatever the shape or size of an institution, making policy work, and achieving desired outcomes of appropriate quality, is likely to depend on facilitative relationships day-to-day. In practice the segment of the institution that the individual inhabits, rather than the institution, may be the meaningful arena of activity. Thus as one respondent acknowledged:

...the culture is very consensual, very democratic and I feel very fortunate for that. It's not like that everywhere (mid-career faculty).

Formal contractual arrangements such as pay and conditions, and informal understandings and expectations that contribute to the quality of the psychological contract, including a sense of recognition and opportunities for personal development, represent a critical relationship. Managing expectations on both sides, and the way in which institutional arrangements are interpreted by, for instance, heads of department and programme leaders, is likely to be paramount, for instance in balancing deteriorating staff student ratios with pressure on individual workloads. The trick for local managers is to recognise the interplay of policy and institutional structures with the agency of individuals and what they might achieve individually. The possibilities may only appear at local level. In fact as a number of respondents in the studies suggested, it is for local

managers not only to recognise, but also to create, discretionary space in which potentials can be developed and realised. In turn, it is for senior management teams to ensure that institutional policies are as far as possible informed by and congruent with local practice.

Thus structures alone are unlikely to be sufficient to safeguard and promote the interests of people with a range of career backgrounds and trajectories, and there is a major role for managers, mentors and individuals in facilitating policy implementation across a spectrum of *obligatory*, *discretionary* and *voluntary* relationships. However the studies also suggest that there can be a tendency to conservatism with respect to existing structures, which may take time and effort to change, even where there is a will to do so. There may therefore also be a calculation on the part of individuals as to the extent to which it may be helpful to subscribe to existing structures and processes for the time being. Relationships are likely to be adjusted across a spectrum of *instrumental* and *investing* approaches, in order to accommodate the ebb and flow of individual and institutional aspirations.