

Professional and Support staff in Higher Education

Introduction - Being a Higher Education Professional Today

This monograph not only provides a snapshot of the contemporary professional workforce in higher education, but also aims to identify emergent trends and indicators in relation to roles and identities, collectively and individually. To introduce the range of perspectives that follow, this chapter reviews current thinking about what it means to be a professional in higher education today, including a converging relationship with academic roles and identities, and illustrates ways in which higher education professionals are pushing the boundaries of their domains.

As assumptions and expectations about institutional purposes have become less settled, working environments have become less contained, externally and internally. This has resulted from, for instance, increasing pressure on institutions to make a socio-economic, as well as an intellectual, contribution to society (Callender and Scott 2013; Krucken, Blume and Kloke 2013; Marginson 2013; UK Department for Business, Education and Skills 2016; Davis, van Rensburg and Venter 2016); the development of knowledge exchange as a critical activity for institutions in global market environments (Etzkowitz 2008; Scott, 1995; Sharrock 2012; Temple 2012; Marginson 2016); and the loss of a monopoly for higher education institutions, and those within them, as knowledge providers (Sennett, 2004; Cummings and Finkelstein 2012; Scott 2014).

Such changes present a less secure framework than hitherto for institutional activity, and for that of professional staff. This has in turn led to developing understandings around the concept of *Third Space*, which is gaining currency in describing movements that are occurring across professional and academic domains (Whitchurch 2013). Feedback at presentations given by the author suggests that in some quarters there is a sense that, whether formally designated as professional or academic, as one participant suggested, 'we are all *Third Space* now'. This reflects the multiple agendas with which institutions are now involved and the mobility that is expected of both professional and academic staff. Examples of new roles that have been created in response to contemporary agendas include, for instance:

- *Learning development and academic practice* in support of the student experience, such as tutoring, programme design, study skills and academic literacy.
- *Community and business partnership* to support and develop regional links and roles, such as civic and employer engagement, workplace learning,

schools and further education relationships, outreach, campus visits, family liaison.

- *Online learning* to meet demands for distance education and also mixed mode teaching, such as the design, development and adaptation of web-based programmes and the use of social media.
- *Knowledge exchange* to extend the institutional interface with business, industry and public agencies, such as the preparation of bids for funding, management of startup and incubation facilities, and the development of bespoke education and training programmes.
- *Institutional research* to inform institutional planning and decision-making such as analysis of student recruitment, outcomes and employability, and benchmarking with other institutions.

As a result of this extension of agendas and activities, there is evidence that the traditional 'binary' between academic and professional roles is breaking down, and that formal employment categories no longer reflect reality. Moreover, terms such as 'non-academic' and 'support' staff, implying that professional groups are an adjunct to academic colleagues, have become contested (Szekeres 2011, Graham 2012, Sebalj, Holbrook and Bourke 2012, Whitchurch 2013). In turn, some academic staff may move, to a greater or lesser extent, into roles delivering current agendas such as widening participation and employability, whilst retaining teaching and research responsibilities. The two groups are likely not only to work side-by-side, but also to be integrated in mixed teams (Locke, Whitchurch et al 2016; Whitchurch and Gordon 2017). In teaching and learning units particularly, some individuals may have similar qualifications and roles but be distinguished by their formal contracts of employment. This is seen as anomalous in that those with professional contracts may have doctorates and be involved in producing pedagogic research and publications.

There is also evidence of pressure on both academic and professional staff to extend their portfolios, often in the interests of broadly-based institutional projects that are market- and community-oriented, leaving less time for pure disciplinary or functionally-oriented activity. Groups of 'portfolio professionals' (Whitchurch 2013, Whitchurch and Gordon 2017) and 'peripheral professionals' (Duncan 2014) have therefore emerged, who do not necessarily see a single, fixed career ladder. The inclination of younger individuals particularly would appear to be to extend their reach as far as possible rather than clinging to the boundaries of one professional area and closing off opportunities, although some may feel that this dissipates rather than focuses their expertise. This represents a key tension between keeping up-to-date with new developments in a specialist area, such as policy legislation or technical

advances, and being receptive to opportunities and interests outside the immediate job description.

Although the emergence of new forms of professionalism has been noted in the wider literature, these do not fully capture the shifts experienced by higher education professionals in increasingly fluid conditions, as they contribute to the development of their institutions for the future. Understanding these shifts, and possible tensions arising, is likely to be critical to the development of rewarding careers. Furthermore, despite an expanding literature on academic identities and careers (for instance McAlpine and Akerlind 2010; Teichler and Cummings 2015; Yudkevitch, Altbach and Rumbley 2015), particularly for early career staff, this has not been replicated to any extent for professional staff.

Being a professional in higher education

"Ideal" forms of professionalism imply a relatively structured environment, to which clearly documented bodies of knowledge, procedures, and boundaries relate. These focus on "a cluster of qualities relating to a degree of personal and communal control over one's work, where the work itself requires specialized expertise (and qualifications) to be used in the service of the community." (Duncan 2014). The concept derives from major professions such as medicine, usually centred round access to a pre-defined body of knowledge via an accreditation process by a self-regulating professional association. This exclusive knowledge base for professionals, and the legitimacy associated with it, is highlighted by Eraut (1994):

"The power and status of professional workers depends to a significant extent on their claims to unique forms of expertise, which are not shared with other occupational groups, and the value placed on that expertise" (Eraut, 1994: 15).

Upon qualification, and subject to ongoing checks by their peers, the professional has significant autonomy and discretion over this knowledge, which can be updated via reflexive and accredited development activity (Eraut 1994; Schon 1995). The concept also implies norms of behaviour and, in consulting a professional, clients are expected to conform to certain conventions in which, for instance, the judgement of the professional is not subject to challenge (Eraut, 1994: 5).

Classic accounts of being a professional generally have five main tenets:

- A pre-defined body of knowledge
- A professional body which acts as gatekeeper
- Qualifications as an accreditation mechanism
- Adherence to professional codes
- Accredited programs of updating

- Professional autonomy.

However, this notion of professionalism implies a controlled, provider-led, environment, with boundaries that clearly separate those who belong to the professional group from those who do not. Nevertheless, it continues to influence groups of workers who seek to legitimise, or re-legitimise, their position in their occupational sector.

New dimensions to professionalism have been picked up in the wider literature, particularly in relation to the creation of a more market- and customer-oriented environment in the public sector. Friedson (2001: 12) differentiates between “bureaucracy”, where the autonomy of professionals is tempered by the state or organisation, and the “market” where the dominant influence is that of the consumer. Professional staff in higher education might be said to have moved from a situation where they are not only responding to bureaucratic requirements, such as accountability regimes, and institutional regulatory processes, but also to the needs of the student as customer, for instance via the creation of student service centres. However, there are indications that they are doing more than this, in making their own, more active contribution to their institutions, for instance, by initiating developments such as outreach events, publicity about in-house activity, and presentations to colleagues on topical issues.

In the UK, the professionalisation process is reflected in the codification of a body of knowledge associated with professional staff in higher education by the Association of University Administrators (AUA) (Allen and Newcomb, 1999). Furthermore, the establishment of a body of knowledge and a code of practice has been seen as a way of reinforcing collective identity for professional staff:

“This increasing fragmentation will militate against a unified administrative service... unless there is some overarching ethical code, and body of skills and knowledge, which unifies the various specialist groups” (Allen and Newcomb, 1999: 39-40).

In the UK also, the establishment of a Code of Professional Standards promoted an “integrated set” of core values and characteristics (AUA, 2000; Skinner, 2001).

However, the idea of a “unified service”, either at institutional or at sector level, tends to sit uncomfortably with the functional diversification that has taken place in relation to the roles of professional staff. There is evidence of unresolved tension between this process of professionalisation and the diversification of individual roles in the broad grouping represented, for instance, by the Association of University Administrators in the UK or the Association of Tertiary Education Managers in Australasia. This also raises questions about the roles and loyalties of specialist professionals in the sector,

ranging from human resources and marketing to knowledge exchange and estates management, many of whom have their own dedicated professional associations, within and outside higher education. Specialist staff brought in from outside, therefore, may see this as one destination among several. In turn, generalist staff may not see themselves as staying in higher education, but building a portfolio of generic experience including, for instance, client and community services, which they can transfer and utilise in another locale. In this context, Kallenberg (2016) differentiates between specialist and educational administrators as requiring different types of knowledge:

"A distinction can be made between two types of support, namely pure administrative tasks (human resources; finance and control computerisation and automation, marketing and communication, facility management, legal affairs) and sector-specific tasks (educational and research support)" (Kallenberg 2016: 181).

He goes on to suggest that educational administrators, with their dedicated sector-specific knowledge, could be referred to as a 'fourth power' alongside specialist professionals, academic managers and 'third space' professionals.

At the same time, the structures framing professional activity, as represented for instance in organisation charts, have been overlaid by team-oriented approaches, as extended projects such as widening participation and business development demand input from different staff with a range of expertise. This increasing fluidity is further reflected in broader changes at the boundary between practitioners and clients in that, traditionally, clients are expected to enter the practitioner's space, such as a doctor's surgery, to obtain a consultation. In contemporary environments, however, the practitioner would be expected increasingly to enter client space, for example, in the community. In higher education institutions, practitioner space might be represented traditionally by a student services office, or a senior management suite. However, professional staff involved in developments such as community and business partnership would be as likely to talk to clients in, for instance, the school sector or a regional development agency.

Quality assurance was an early example of activity in which academic and professional staff work together in mixed teams, although this could in turn lead to tensions about who 'owns' the process:

"The assertion that academic staff engage with quality only when forced to do so by the 'professionals' in the central quality office of a university or agencies such as the QAA is contested... because the academic is the subject expert, he or she is actually central to the concept of quality, in partnership with students." (Barnes and Bohrer 2014).

Tensions can also arise from the location of professional activity. For instance quality assurance can sometimes be located within academic practice,

sometimes within professional development, and sometimes within student services. The location of activities affect their character, ownership, and perceptions of them by staff, students and external partners. Thus, restructuring alone may not necessarily enhance an activity unless synergy is created around it and individuals themselves are able to navigate, and even modulate, the structures in which they find themselves.

Shifts in the nature of being a professional in higher education have therefore given rise to a number of tensions and challenges for individual managers. These include the extent of an individual's autonomy when developing activities not specified in their original job description, and conversely, the implications for institutions of fewer boundaries on individuals, and ways in which it can be ensured that extended activities remain in the institution's interests. A potential reduction in the number of specialists could also be a problem and lead to a lack of appropriate expertise and/or the need to recruit from outside higher education. This is already happening in relation to, for instance, human resources and financial management. Moreover it has been suggested that there are generational factors at play, that younger people are more comfortable in extended or *Third Space* roles, and that they are likely to seek to develop a portfolio of activity, so as to grow their careers that way. This in turn has implications for succession planning, for both institutions and line managers.

In summary, whilst the classic attributes of individual professions remain as shown on the left hand side of Table 1 (Whitchurch 2013: 105), there has also been a general movement towards looser, less elitist forms of professionalism, as shown in the right hand column. Such accounts of being a professional are more open-ended, and likely to involve individuals in pushing the boundaries, adding to a portfolio of activity on an ongoing basis, developing new knowledge about their institution, including knowledge-in-practice, and engaging with clients.

| Classic accounts of professionalism | Contemporary practice of professionalism |
|--|---|
| Pre-defined body of knowledge | Creating own knowledge base |
| Professional body as gatekeeper | Professional body as network |
| Qualifications as an accreditation mechanism | Qualifications as one aspect of portfolio |
| Adherence to professional codes | Work-based and on-the-job learning |
| Professional autonomy | Client orientation |

Table 1 Extending the boundaries of professionalism (Whitchurch 2013: 105).

The professional manager

New forms of professionalism raise issues, also, about the relationship between professional activity and management, as noted in relation to, for instance, the NHS and legal professions (Ferlie, Ashburner and Fitzgerald, 1995; Middlehurst and Kenzie, 1995). This translates into ways in which managers themselves can be regarded as professionals. In asking “are managers the new professionals?”, Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts (1997: 9) suggest that “new professionalism” implies a closer interaction with employing organisations, “requiring a shift in previous professional practice towards accepting organisational identity and change” (Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts, 1997: 10). This corresponds with ideas about the contribution that professional staff might be making to the development of their institutions. For instance, in a US context, Rhoades (1996; 1998) identifies a category of staff that he describes as “managerial professionals”, who have emerged as a distinctive grouping on the basis of knowledge they hold, that is dedicated to the development of their institutions for the future.

At the same time, in response to changing conditions, internal management responsibilities have become more dispersed, as both professional and academic managers have become more accountable at local level for the performance of their schools, faculties and departments in devolved institutional structures in large and complex institutions. This also applies at the level of programme teams. More individuals are therefore gaining management experience at an earlier stage of their careers. They may even have responsibility for the activities of people who are senior to them, for instance educational technology professionals may be required to advise professors on how best to adapt their programmes for online delivery.

The passage of time has also seen a shift from more procedural forms of activity by professional staff, traditionally described as 'administration', to a more active part in decision-making and resource allocation, more accurately described as 'management'. However, although the professional association in Australia, the Association of Tertiary Education Managers (ATEM), refers to 'managers', there has been a reluctance to change the name of the UK Association of University Administrators (AUA). This may be cultural, in view of the fact that the term 'manager' is contested in higher education, and also the persistence of sensibilities arising from the public service origins of 'administration'. Nevertheless a shift has, in practice, also occurred in the UK, and can be conceptualised in relation to the distinction between two broad categories of knowledge, “process knowledge” and “propositional knowledge”

as articulated by Eraut (1994). The former involves the “deliberative processes” of acquiring, assimilating and interpreting information in ways that are relevant to the specific organisational locale. In a university context this could include case law and precedent in relation to student progress, or the creation and updating of procedures for the delivery of programmes in a school or faculty. Such knowledge accrues primarily through custom and practice, and is associated with organisational maintenance to meet, for instance, regulatory, legislative and technical requirements. There is a sense, therefore, in which it is retrospective, and associated more with the characteristics of 'administration' focused on the documenting of standards, than of management, focused on policy and/or resource decisions, which may imply change.

“Propositional knowledge”, by contrast, is represented by “discipline-based theories and concepts ... generalisations and practical principles” that can be applied to particular decisions and actions (Eraut, 1994: 103). It is likely to involve the establishment of an evidence base, such as data on student recruitment or staff employment trends, that will assist with decision-making. As planning and institutional development have assumed greater priority, the shift from administration towards management can therefore be seen in terms of the replacement of “process knowledge” by “propositional knowledge”. While the former emphasises the maintenance of processes and standards, the latter is more likely to emphasise a critical analysis of data in ways that inform choices and decisions. Such knowledge is likely to include an understanding of market environments, and reflect what Eraut (1994) and Friedson (2001) term an “elite” form of professionalism, going beyond mere technical competence as represented by “standard” forms.

Nevertheless, dissonance may well occur as a result of sensitivities as to whether or not individuals are seen as 'managers', and this can lead to the practice of managing 'without seeming to do so'. This might be seen as being in deference to the autonomy of academics as professionals, and in acknowledgement that space and time are needed for innovation and creativity. Similarly, potential credibility issues can arise for professional staff when they are effectively in a position of managing academic staff, even if not formally designated as their 'manager', for instance in relation to the student experience. A situation can also arise when roles are split across sites, in which individuals, professional or academic, may be answerable to multiple managers for different areas of activity, with the potential for identity strain and even conflict. In turn this can lead to a process of “splitting” as individuals find themselves working with different practices, which enables them “to deal with two contradictory things at the same time without either transcending or repressing that contradiction...” (Bhabha quoted in Mitchell 1995: 5-6). As well as practical issues arising from local custom and practice, for instance in relation to informal rewards and incentives, there may also be professional

issues around, for instance, ensuring that different areas of work are coherent, and congruent with overarching agendas.

Professional development

The last twenty five years or so has also seen the establishment of dedicated qualifications and development programmes such as the AUA Postgraduate Certificate (AUA, 2004; Carrette, 2005), the MBA in Higher Education Management run by University College London Institute of Education, the Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (eLamp) run by the G. H. Martin Institute in Melbourne, and European programmes run by Centres for Higher Education Development and University Associations, for instance in Berlin and Vienna. There has also been an increase in professional staff seeking relevant higher qualifications such as master's degrees and taught doctorates. These follow well-established programmes in the US.

Although credentialism for professional staff is on the rise, there are also pressures for 'just-in-time', work-based feedback and development, that can be incorporated as an integral part of day-to-day working. This corresponds to findings in Locke, Whitchurch et al (2016) and Whitchurch and Gordon (2017) in relation to academic staff. Similar issues are noted in relation to professional staff in Veles and Carter (2016), who by extension suggest that project and research skills in particular could be facilitated by the establishment of communities of practice, and the involvement of postgraduate students in mixed project teams. As noted in Whitchurch and Gordon (2017), relationships with local line managers and mentors can have a disproportionate effect, positively and negatively, in raising awareness of opportunities and providing career direction by, for instance, facilitating conference attendance, promoting activities such as serving on a working group or attachment to a specific project, and giving encouragement to individuals to be proactive in promoting their skills and potentials. Likewise, the use of social media and online networks emerged as a supportive mechanism, particularly for early career staff who might feel isolated within their function or discipline, and where self-help appears to be the only immediate option. More specifically, a proactive (or in sociological terms, agentic) approach to the structures and circumstances that individuals find themselves in appears to be a critical element of developing a professional career in higher education today. Thus the following extract, written in relation to young academic staff trying to forge a career, would seem equally relevant to professional staff:

"It becomes critically important for young professionals to obtain relevant research skills, acquire useful... connections, and integrate themselves into international academic networks... It becomes important not only to be bright and productive but also to be fast, establishing oneself quickly in the field" (Finkelstein, Iglesias, Panova and Yudkevich (2015: 346).

This would appear to be essential for professional staff if they are to compete successfully for senior jobs traditionally filled by academic managers (Shepherd 2016). Networks of all types are of increasing significance and support the extension of relationships and knowledge (Veles and Carter 2016; Whitchurch and Gordon 2017). The notion of the "scholar-practitioner", who engages in institutional research and practice, also has currency here (Streitwieser and Ogden 2016), and is likely to develop as professional staff continue to gain higher academic credentials.

Conclusion

Being a professional in higher education today, therefore, is likely to involve being able to work with multiple agendas, some of which may point in different directions, accommodating the tensions and dissonances that are likely to arise. Some immediate contexts will be specific to individuals, but others are likely to be of general applicability, such as those noted in this chapter. For instance, the location and ownership of professional activities, especially those bordering what are seen traditionally as academic domains, may well be subject to ongoing negotiation. Territorial attitudes may constrain team working, particularly in relation to specialist roles which may require specific qualifications and experience. Conversely, individuals who become too aligned with, for instance, the aspirations of a school or faculty, may be seen as 'going native' by an institution's senior management team, and as departing from collective institutional strategy. Furthermore, the perceptions generated in others may be more significant than actual allegiances, notwithstanding the fact that individual professionals are likely to see themselves as being neutral and impartial. This is particularly so when professional staff are portrayed as 'managers', with associated perceptions of power and influence. Questions of the extent of individual autonomy also come into play. The way that individuals work with, and find solutions to, these multi-dimensional agendas, thereby promoting organisation development as opposed to the maintenance of activity, is likely to define the higher education professional of the future and the directions they are able to take.

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