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PROFESSIONAL MANAGERS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: CHANGING ROLES AND IDENTITIES

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Introduction

Professional managers in UK universities represent an increasingly diverse grouping of staff. As boundaries blur between academic activity, and the contributory functions required to deliver that activity in mass higher education systems and markets, their roles have become more fluid. Quasi-academic territories are developing, in which professional managers' activities converge and overlap with those of academic and other colleagues. As a result, existing definitions and descriptors, based on outmoded concepts of 'administration' and 'management', no longer provide clear understandings of professional identities and potentials. As the university is transformed from a community of scholars into a "community of professionals" (AUT, 2001), the concept of knowledge management may assist in explaining the changes that are occurring, and in preparing professional staff for uncertain and complex futures.

Defining "professional managers"

A central problem for professional managers in higher education is the lack of precise definitions or terminologies for staff in universities who are not classified as

‘academic’. This is particularly so for professional managers, who are increasingly heterogeneous as a group.

Note: This paper is based on an interim report undertaken for the UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) in relation to a research project entitled *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures*. The full interim report can be found on the LFHE website: www.lfhe.ac.uk/projects.

A range of descriptors are in circulation, including “manager”, “administrator”, “non-academic staff”, “academic related staff”, “professional staff” and “support staff”, all of which are used in different official classifications. This creates difficulties that seem to be at the root of wide ranging perceptions about the roles and potentials of professional managers.

In this paper, the term “professional managers” is used to capture those people performing generalist roles, such as student services or departmental management, and also those in specialist roles, such as finance and human resources. It includes career administrators, though not staff on clerical grades (although the latter could include people who might in future move to a professional or management grade). However, as the polarisation of ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ work breaks down, and academic and organisational agendas coalesce in various ways, there is increasing overlap between the functions and identities of professional staffs, for instance in areas such as quality and widening participation (Whitchurch, 2006(a) and (b)).

For instance, multi-professional identities can arise for staff who:

- Have academic credentials such as masters and doctoral level qualifications.
- Have a teaching/research background in adult, further or higher education.

- Work in multi-functional teams dealing with, for instance, the preparation of quality initiatives or major bids for infrastructure funding, which require the coordination of technical, academic, and policy contributions.
- Undertake tasks that in the past would have been undertaken solely by academic staff, such as offering pastoral advice to students, speaking at outreach events in schools, or undertaking overseas recruitment visits and interviews.
- Undertake quasi-academic functions such as study skills for access or overseas students, or embedding action on disability or diversity into the curriculum. Such functions may involve skills in teaching or research and development, even though the staff concerned might be categorised as ‘non-academic’.
- Provide an expert, interpretive function between academic staff and external partners in relation to, for instance, the marketing of tailor-made programmes, or the development of research spin out and business partnership.

The term “professional manager”, therefore, incorporates all such people, some of whom who might see themselves as moving into academic management roles, for instance, a pro-vice-chancellor post with a portfolio such as administration, quality, or staffing.

A note about ‘administration’ and ‘management’

Movements that have taken place over time in the use of the terms ‘administration’ and ‘management’ have contributed to the instabilities around terminologies and

understandings. The identities of contemporary professional managers derive in part from roles played by a relatively homogeneous cadre of administrative staff in the pre-1992 sector, whose prime purpose was to support collegial decision making by academic colleagues, from whom they were clearly differentiated. Thus, early commentators viewed a university's supporting infrastructure as its "academic civil service" (Sloman, 1964; Lockwood, 1986) or "academic administration" (Shattock, 1970). There was a clear boundary between what was seen as 'the Administration' and academic activity, whereby administrative staff were seen as 'serving' not only academic activity, but the academic staff themselves. While the term "academic administration" is used sometimes to describe those activities that are not teaching and research (for instance, Barnett, 1993), it tends increasingly to refer to registry and secretariat functions, whereby administrators act as "guardians of the regulations" (Barnett, 2000: 133). One legacy from the 'administrative' tradition is that administrative staff are seen as a source of continuity (McNay, 2005: 43).

Shifts away from 'public service' modes of operation can be dated to around the time of the Jarratt Report in 1985. This highlighted what were perceived as shortcomings in collegial decision-making processes in dealing with hard decisions arising from the resource constraints experienced in the 1980s (Jarratt, 1985). Scott (1995) notes a consequent "upgrading of managerial capacity", in which corporate and strategic planning initiatives driven by professional administrators and managers were "one of the most significant but underrated phenomena of the last two decades", so that:

"A managerial cadre began to emerge, ready to support a more executive leadership, in place of the docile clerks, who had instinctively acknowledged

the innate authority of academics.” (Scott, 1995: 64)

Kogan (1999), also, acknowledges the emergence of more “developmental” roles concerned with “developing the ‘personality’ of the institution by promulgating it effectively in the external environment.” (Kogan, 1999: 275).

As the term ‘management’ gained currency, ideas and understandings of ‘administration’ became less well defined. The term ‘administrator’ could extend from low-level clerking or processing roles to very senior, decision-making positions, with a range of generalist and specialist functions in between. The situation was further obscured by the fact that those who had begun their careers in an environment of public administration responded to the shift towards ‘management’ by becoming adept at managing while appearing not to do so:

“... becoming more chameleon-like – changing his or her spots to fit into and make a contribution to changing management teams and structures, and the different skills and attributes their academic and other colleagues bring to the table ...” (Holmes, 1998: 112)

Such a shrouding of ‘management’ by ‘administration’ also reflected a continued equivocation about the term ‘management’, attributable to “a highly resilient anti-management culture – even amongst managers” (Archer, 2005: 5).

More recently, it has been suggested that the term ‘administrator’ no longer reflects contemporary roles and should be discarded (Lauwerys, 2002). Lambert (2003) noted that a re-badging has taken place in some institutions, whereby terms such as “professional services” have been adopted. It is significant in this connection that the

HESA definitions (HESA, 2005)

group “administrators” with “library assistants, clerks and general administrative assistants”, specifically in terms of non-graduate staff. This contrasts with the traditional “academic-related” grades in the pre-1992 sector, which were restricted to a graduate entry to a civil service type of administrative cadre, and illustrates the change of meaning that has taken place around the term ‘administration’. Likewise, HEFCE (2005: 19), drawing on the HESA data, combines managers in a category with other types of professionals (“Managers and professionals”), and administrators in a category with clerical and other support staff (“Support administrators”).

The interface with academia

One connecting thread for professional managers is their relationship with academic colleagues and agendas. In the academic literature (for instance, Trowler, 1998; Henkel, 2000; Prichard, 2000; Becher and Trowler, 2001), ideas of ‘administration’ and ‘management’ are poorly defined and understood. On the one hand, perceptions of ‘administrators’ tend to undervalue their knowledge, responsibility and personal agency:

““The service people provide services and are therefore subservient ... They are not initiators or developers of the institution!.” (Pro-vice-chancellor, post-1992 university, quoted in Prichard, 2000: 190).

On the other hand, ‘managers’ can also be portrayed in a negative light, for instance where they are perceived as being aligned with the institutional or government policies that they have been charged with implementing (Parker and Jary, 1995; Prichard and Willmott, 1997; Deem, 1998). A further preoccupation (for instance, Halsey, 1992; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Ramsden, 1998; Trowler, 1998) is the

perception of a transfer of power from the academic community to those with management responsibilities (academic *and* professional managers), implying a clear separation of agendas between managers and rank-and-file academic staff.

The polarisation of academic and management domains has been picked up in a number of studies. For instance, Middlehurst (1993: 190) notes “clear fault-lines ... between, for example, academics and administrators, staff and ‘management’”. Negative constructions of both administration and management may account for an ambivalence about devolving tasks to dedicated managers, despite the fact that academic staff are over-burdened (Henkel, 2000; Prichard, 2000):

“...academics want to govern themselves but they rarely want to manage; they are often poor managers when they do manage; and yet they deny rights of management to others” (Dearlove, 1998: 73).

This low confidence in professional staff would seem to derive from a lack of respect for ‘administration’ as being weak and ineffective, combined with a lack of trust in ‘management’ as being over-controlling. Overcoming these perceptions, even if they are outmoded in contemporary institutions, is, therefore, a key task for university leaders and managers.

The situation is made more complex by the fact that, despite evidence that professional administrators and managers build up valued local relationships, for instance with a dean or head of school (Gornitzka et al, 1998; Bolton, 2000; Hare and Hare, 2002; McMaster, 2005), this value is not necessarily reflected when they are considered as a collective. Thus, the concept of management can become abstracted

from that of the individuals performing the function, so that managers collectively are referred to simply as “management” (as in Henkel, 2000: 253). There would appear, therefore, to be a dissonance between implicit (local and personal appreciation of value) and explicit (public expression of value) understandings. Furthermore, there is not always common understanding between academic and management colleagues about what may be a valued local relationship. For instance, in an Australian context, McMaster (2005: 135-6) found that whereas five of fifteen deans interviewed described their relationship with their faculty manager as one of partnership, no more than five faculty managers used that term, viewing their role as a “support function”. Thus, it has been claimed that administrative staff are “invisible” because of a lack of understanding as to what their roles involve (Szekeres, 2004). It has also been suggested that professional staff are defined largely by what they are not (as “non-academic”) and, therefore, as the ‘other’ in anthropological terms:

"They are 'threshold people' who fall on or between the boundaries of categories, a 'liminal' status, which social anthropologists argue, carries implications of both marginalisation (Leach 1996; 35), and power (Douglas 1996, Turner 1969: 86)" (Gornall, 1999: 48).

There is also evidence that professional managers can be subject to conflicting identities. If they adopt a service mode, they may be regarded as “docile clerks” (Scott, 1995: 64), but if they contribute to decision- and policy-making, they may be perceived as being overly powerful. Such tensions may arise also in Clark’s (1998) “core” and “periphery” model. If professional administrators and managers pursue an agenda supporting the interests of their academic colleagues in the “academic

heartlands”, they are at risk of being accused of “going native” by their colleagues at the centre. If they pursue a corporate line, they may be seen as prioritising what are perceived as managerial concerns by academic colleagues (Whitchurch, 2004). It has also been suggested that professional administrators and managers are positioned increasingly out-with institutional structures, with the implication that they are not signed up to institutional agendas, or integrated within the university community:

“a national (and international) cadre of mobile and unattached senior managers without loyalty but with their own (not an institutional) portfolio – the new portfolio successional career managers...” (Duke, 2002: 146).

The professionalisation process

The practitioner literature gives an insight into the perceptions of administrators and managers themselves during a process of professionalisation, for instance, via the establishment of dedicated postgraduate qualifications, a journal, a Code of Professional Standards (AUA, 2000; Skinner, 2001), and the development of a body of knowledge associated with the policy requirements of the sector (Allen and Newcomb, 1999). Carrette (2005) characterises higher education management as an “emerging” or “post-emerging profession”, whereby entrants to the profession are almost all graduate and increasingly postgraduate, and have membership of a professional body or bodies (such as the Association of University Administrators (AUA) or specialist bodies such as the British Universities Finance Directors Group).

Descriptions of the impact of the professionalisation process have been characterised by an essentialist approach to professional identity, via the definition of pre-requisite

knowledges and skills (Allen and Newcomb, 1999). Likewise, the AUA Code of Professional Standards promotes an “integrated set” of core values and characteristics (AUA, 2000). These approaches do not, however, necessarily allow for the increasing diversity of professional managers as a grouping, and the fact that identities are increasingly built across multiple zones of activity, rather than comprising core elements that are inherited or adopted on the assumption of a particular role or position; thus, a “project” rather than an “essence” (Henkel (2000: 14), drawing on Giddens (1991)).

Picking up the theme of diversity, Conway (2000: 15) suggests that:

“... it is probably time for 'a wider re-think about boundaries, constituencies and names!'” (Conway, 2000: 15)

The challenge is one of both definition and perception:

“... there is little recognition beyond administrators themselves that a definable occupational grouping exists. The existence of administrators with qualifications equal to those of a university’s professors is a new phenomenon, and not all these “super administrators” are simply academics who have transferred from academe.” (Dobson and Conway, 2003: 125)

Rather than fitting professional staff into existing categories, however, it may be necessary to find new ways of understanding and describing their contribution.

Increasing attention to workforce development means that professional staff have begun to appear in their own right in a number of official reports. The Dearing Report (1997) represents an early attempt to describe the identities of what were defined in Supplementary Report 4 as “administrative and support staff”. However, the Report

reflects a confusion about the roles and identities of “administrators and managers” in that institutions were asked “not to include the names of senior staff or managers” in their nominations for focus groups of administrative and non-academic staff (Supplementary Report 4, Appendix 1, paragraph 5). This implies that ‘administration’ and ‘management’ can be distinguished on the basis of the seniority of post-holders and, foreshadowing the HESA definitions (HESA, 2005), that whereas ‘administration’ once conferred the ethos and values of professional staff in public service environments, it now more often than not refers to routine clerical tasks.

HEFCE (2003: 1), in launching its Leadership, Governance and Management Fund, expressed the need to increase “esteem and recognition” for the management function, and Lambert (2003: 95) noted "traditional and out-moded perceptions of ... administrations". A report by the AUT, on the contribution of “academic-related” staff to the delivery of higher education, provides detailed examples from a survey of both academic and professional staff on the kinds of areas in which academic and professional staff are working collaboratively:

“Administrators are involved in a range of activities related to student learning, including teaching, preparing learning materials, participation in quality assurance, monitoring courses, and supporting students in difficulties.”
(AUT, 2001:8).

This statement is corroborated by comments from respondents as to how and where transitions are occurring across the boundaries of functional areas, and the report, therefore, begins to provide an evidence base, including examples of professional staff who teach, mentor students, and write course material. It is somewhat ahead of

its time in suggesting that universities are “becoming communities of professional staff, not just communities of scholars” (AUT, 2001: 19).

The changing university community

Despite the fact that clear distinctions between academic and management activity remain deeply rooted in some quarters (see for instance, Fulton, 2003; Yelder and Codling, 2004), other commentators are beginning to recognise that the delivery of extended academic agendas in complex environments can only be achieved through equally valued, but different, contributions from a range of staff. Duke (2003), for instance, suggests that:

“Breaking down disciplinary barriers, and also enhancing collaborative teamwork between classes of workers (administrative, professional, academic, technical) is one side of new management. It is required by and grows with the external networking on which universities depend to play a useful and sustainable part in networked knowledge societies.” (Duke, 2003: 54).

This view echoes that of Gumport and Sporn (1999). They regard it as imperative that professional managers “stay attuned to multiple environments” in “sustaining institutional legitimacy”, and “functioning as interpreters” (Gumport and Sporn, 1999: 128 -131). To this end, partnership between academic and professional staff is beginning to be acknowledged, as well as a crossing between fields of activity:

"What is often forgotten is that over the past few years there has been increasing traffic across the administrative-academic divide. Some academics move into administration, and many administrators have higher degrees."

Bassnett (2004: 3).

This process is exemplified by team working between academic and professional staff in preparations for external audit and assessment, the assembling of bids for external funding, and projects such as Investors in People.

While it has been noted that academic staff are beginning to occupy different spaces in the university (Barnett, 2005; Henkel, 2005), the generation of new space for professional staff has not been fully documented, although there is evidence that moves from a service orientation to partnership working are leading to the emergence of new types of professional manager (Whitchurch, 2006(a)). These include people who develop niche functions, such as marketing, in a higher education context; people who promote themselves as “professional managers”, with the aim of being able to move between institutions on a management track as well as on the basis of an accredited specialism; and others who see themselves primarily as “project managers”, with the mobility to move out of higher education if they so wish.

In Australia, also, there has been recognition of a growing “mixed economy” of activity in universities, leading to a “post-collegial, post-managerial form of university community” (Marginson and Considine 2000: 250). Marginson and Considine also suggest that non-academic staff are under-represented in terms of having a voice in the institutional community, although they “are just as capable of sharing commitment to the institution and its work as are academic staff” (Marginson and Considine (2000: 251). In the US, Rhoades has identified a group of staff whom he terms “managerial professionals”, who “engage in activities related to producing quality education, entrepreneurial revenues, research and students...” (Rhoades and

Sporn, 2002: 16). He calls for them to become embedded in the processes of governance and decision-making:

“...we need to expand academic democracy beyond tenure-track faculty and senior administrators to include contingent faculty and managerial professionals... [who] participate in institutions’ basic academic work, and like faculty... have important expertise about the academy to contribute in shared governance.” (Rhoades 2005: 5).

What appears to be required, therefore, is a more sustained picture of professional managers’ membership of and contribution to the university as a community of professionals. Although commentators such as Rhoades, and more recently Sharrock (2004; 2005), point to modified understandings about the identities of professional managers as members of a more integrated higher education ‘project’, these remain to be followed up:

“We should develop a fuller understanding of ... managerial professionals’ daily lives and everyday practices – “thick descriptions” of their work... The professional and political terrain of colleges and universities is far more complex than our current categories allow for.” (Rhoades, 1998: 143).

The diversification of professional roles, therefore, means that they can no longer be categorised simply via a binary division between ‘generalist’ and ‘specialist’ staff. Individual managers are increasingly likely to be focused on a project or series of projects, rather than occupying roles oriented towards institutional processes or structures (Whitchurch, 2006(a)), reflecting “the replacement of ‘bureaucratic’ careers by flexible job portfolios” (Scott, 1997: 7). Posts are being created that cross boundaries between management and academic activity (Middlehurst, 2000; 2004;

Whitchurch, 2004), and these roles are difficult to place within prescribed boundaries, either in relation to their knowledge base, their task portfolios, or their identity vis-à-vis other professionals. This has implications for the potentials, professional development, and career futures of the managers concerned.

In the contemporary university, rather than relying solely on knowledge legitimated by accreditation, by apprenticeship, or by length of experience, professional managers are, therefore, developing knowledge that is “a mixture of theory and practice, abstraction and aggregation, ideas and data” (Gibbons et al 1994: 81). In this scenario, a simple dichotomy between academic and management activities no longer holds:

“A more accurate account might emphasise the growing interpenetration of academic and managerial practice within higher education. In areas such as continuing education, technology transfer and special access programmes for the disadvantaged there is no easy separation between their intellectual and administrative aspects... academic values and managerial practice have been combined in unusual and volatile combinations.” (Gibbons et al, 1994: 84)

The higher education system has become “a network of knowledge-based institutions in a state of continual flux” Sharrock (2002: 178). In this context, Gibbons et al (1994), in their arguments about the significance of “Mode 2” knowledge for contemporary working environments, suggest that:

“the job of senior managers, while retaining earlier responsibilities, has gradually shifted over the past decades from managing internal resources to managing the boundary... managers in higher education are beginning to

operate in similar mode.

They must become active partners in a very complex knowledge producing game. A crucial element in this game is the ability to move back and forth between environments, which are at one moment collaborative and at another competitive.” (Gibbons et al, 1994: 65)

In this changing environment, therefore:

“There is clear potential for creating collaborations and partnerships across the boundaries between the heartland and the periphery to meet the needs of new or existing clients and markets and indeed, to create similar lateral relationships and cross-organisational roles between the university and other organisations.” (Middlehurst, 2004: 275)

Conclusion

As distinctions blur between academic work, and the contributory functions required to contextualise that work in global, mass higher education systems, the character of the university as a professional community is changing. It is increasingly difficult to match the locations of professional staff with readings of the university found in organisation charts and job descriptions. While a number of commentators have registered awareness that changes are occurring, the wider implications of these movements for individuals, for institutions, or for the sector, have not been pursued in detail. As it becomes more diverse, multi-professional ways of working are being assumed. A language is required, therefore, that moves away from pre-conceived ideas of ‘administration’ and ‘management’, and re-conceptualises these emerging identities.

It is suggested, therefore, that:

- Official descriptors and categories available to describe professional managers in higher education are inadequate.
- Understandings of the roles of professional managers are unclear, particularly those out-with traditional ‘specialist’ and ‘generalist’ categories, or those that cross into academic territories.
- Despite more recent acknowledgement of changes in the workforce, there remain deep-rooted perceptions of ‘administration’ and ‘management’ as being activities disconnected from, and even antithetical to, academic agendas.
- Discourses are beginning to emerge suggesting that professional managers are creating new space in the university, crossing management and academic territories, and involving new forms of management.

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Bionote

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