Whitchurch, C. (2017). Professional Staff Identities in Higher Education. In *Encyclopaedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Introduction

The literature on professional staff identities as a discrete entity began to develop in the late 1990s and early 2000s, although this group has long suffered from problems of nomenclature. The lack of a vocabulary with which to provide a more precise perspective on them is illustrated by the range of terms that have been used to describe them, including ‘non-academic staff”, ‘academic-related staff', ‘general staff', ‘support staff', 'managerial professionals' and 'para-academics'. It was not until the mid-2000s that 'professional staff' became commonly used to describe those staff who were not employed on academic contracts, but who had administrative and management roles, both in academic departments and schools, and in specialist areas such as finance, human resources and estates. The picture has been further complicated in recent years by the emergence of staff with non-academic contracts undertaking roles that are likely to involve academic elements such as writing research grant applications, teaching study skills, and establishing online learning platforms. Because professional staff identities are not easily defined, there have been misconceptions about their roles, reflected for instance in the UK Dearing Report (Thomas 1998).

The emergence of professional identities

Early work on professional identities focused mainly on a process of professionalisation via the development of skills and good practice, a movement from ‘administration’ or ‘service’ towards ‘management’, and the relationship between academic and professional staff. Warner and Palfreyman (1996) offered the most comprehensive account at that point in time. In turn, Holmes (1998) considers a shift from administrative service to more management-oriented approaches. Allen and Newcomb (1999) go on to describe a professionalization process, and Skinner (2001) describes moves to codify a body of knowledge and promote an integrated set of core values and characteristics.

In response to changing conditions, internal responsibilities have tended to 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. 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. Furthermore, as activities geared towards institutional development have assumed greater priority, the shift from administration towards management can be seen in terms of the replacement of “process knowledge” by “propositional knowledge” (Eraut 1994). 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. This is reflected in a decline in so-called 'clerical' roles and a rise in 'professional, managerial and technical' roles (Hogan 2014).

A perceived 'binary' between academic and professional staff

Much of the literature on academic identities is framed in terms of a binary division between academic and professional staff, although in practice they are likely to work together in areas such as student services. McInnis (1998), Hare and Hare (2002), Dobson and Conway (2003) and Middlehurst (2010) describe an emerging partnership between academic and professional staff, and point to the need for a clearer recognition of professional role. There has also tended to be a mismatch between a local and implicit appreciation of the roles of individuals, who work alongside academic colleagues, and of professional staff as a collective, perceived in the abstract as 'management', and as pursuing agendas that are separate from those of academics (for instance Lewis and Altbach 1996, Rhoades 1998). Hence a misreading of Gordon and Whitchurch (2010), which is quoted as implying that professional staff have a stronger influence than academic staff: "The decline of the professional status of university faculty coincides with the processes of authority shift from the academic community to professional administrators (Gordon and Whitchurch 2010)" (Yudkevich 2017). It is also the case that 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. In practice, therefore, perceptions may be more significant than actual allegiances, notwithstanding the fact that individual professionals are likely to see themselves as being neutral and impartial. Such perceptions are likely to be a contributing cause of tensions among rank-and-file professional and academic staff, as described by Szekeres (2011).

The extension and diversification of roles

Lauwerys (2002) was prescient in looking forward to ways in which the roles of professional staff were likely to change in the future to cope with more complex environments, including the development of multi-professional teams and portfolio career patterns. In an early study by Whitchurch (2008), changes in professional staff identities were conceptualised in relation to the institutional structures and boundaries encountered by individuals, and according to whether they adopted 'bounded', 'cross-boundary', or 'unbounded' approaches to their roles (Whitchurch 2008a). The latter two involved greater agency on the part of the individual in relation to broadly based projects such as widening participation that were emerging across the university, as opposed to the implementation of existing systems and processes within given structures.

The literature has continued to reflect the extension and diversification of roles of professional staff. The contributions of Deem (2010); Graham (2009, 2012); Rhoades, Kiyama et al (2008); and Macfarlane (2010), have included, for instance, the contribution of professional staff to research management, widening participation, the student experience, educational development and learning technology, thereby helping to shape and deliver research and teaching. The new roles that have been created in response to contemporary agendas may be clustered in different ways in different institutions, but can be summarised as follows:

- *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.

Breaking down the binary

As a result of this extension of activity, there is evidence that the traditional 'binary' between academic and professional roles is breaking down, and that formal employment categories of 'academic' and 'professional' 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 increasingly 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 within mixed teams (Locke, Whitchurch et al 2016; Whitchurch and Gordon 2017). Some individuals may have similar qualifications and roles to academic colleagues, 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. It has also been pointed out that the generic skills acquired during a research training are also likely to be utilised in roles that are not formally categorised as academic (Berman and Pitman 2010). Issues of recognition, confidence and professional value are therefore increasingly being raised (Duncan 2014; Lewis 2014), along with issues around appropriate professional development (Birds 2014).

The emergence of Third Space Professionals

Whitchurch's work (2008b; 2009; 2013) demonstrates that the complexity of individual and collective identities does not justify a simple, binary division of academic and professional staff, and develops understandings about those who see themselves as working in a permeable ‘Third Space’ between academic and professional domains. Their identities are described in terms of the spaces they occupy, the knowledges they develop, the relationships they form, and the legitimacies and sources authority that they develop. Their credibility and indeed authenticity derives from these sources of identity, and in particular their ability to cope with ambiguities that derive from their positioning. This in turn has led to a literature on a range of professionals seen as operating in Third Space, for instance Veles and Carter (2016) and, more particularly, information technologists (Graham 2013; Botterill 2017);

educational designers (Bissett 2017); research managers (Knight and Lightowler 2010; Shelley 2010; Trinidade and Agostinho 2014; Vidal, Laureano and Trinidade 2015); teaching and learning professionals (Bennett et al 2016; Silvey, Pejcinovic and Snowball 2017; Hallett 2017), and institutional researchers (Calderon and Webber 2013).

Implications of changing professional identities

The location and ownership of professional activities, especially those bordering what are seen traditionally as academic domains, may well be subject to ongoing negotiation. What is uncontested is the ongoing fluidity that now characterise professional roles. The way that individuals work with, and find solutions to 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 that they take. However shifts in the nature of being a professional in higher education have also 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 in this way. This in turn has implications for succession planning, for both institutions and line managers.

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