

Stratification, Centralisation and the REF – The changing face of the UK university workforce

*Drawing on an analysis of HESA and case study data, **Andrew Jenkins and Alison Wolf**, explore the changing composition of the workforce in the UK higher education sector. Trends towards increased professionalisation and centralisation of roles, as well as specialisation in academic roles split between teaching and research were identified. They argue, rather than reflecting discrete strategies, these changes instead largely stem from external influences on higher education funding and evaluation.*

In recent decades there has been enormous growth in higher education. In the UK half of the university age population now enrolls and UK universities attract large numbers of overseas students. Individual universities have grown considerably: some now have over 40,000 students and enrolments in excess of 25,000 are commonplace. At the same time, overt competition between universities has increased, both for international and for home students. And there is increased regulation, notably from the CMA (Competition and Markets Authority) and from the Office for Students.

Many observers have argued that these changes have had a major impact on the university workforce overall and on academics' autonomy and working environment. However, detailed research on staffing of UK universities, especially non-academic staffing, has been scarce.

[Our research](#) drew on under-utilised data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). We tracked broad staffing trends, and variation within the sector, over a period of some 15 years for a large sample of 117 'generalist' HE institutions (that is excluding small and specialist providers).

Two striking findings:

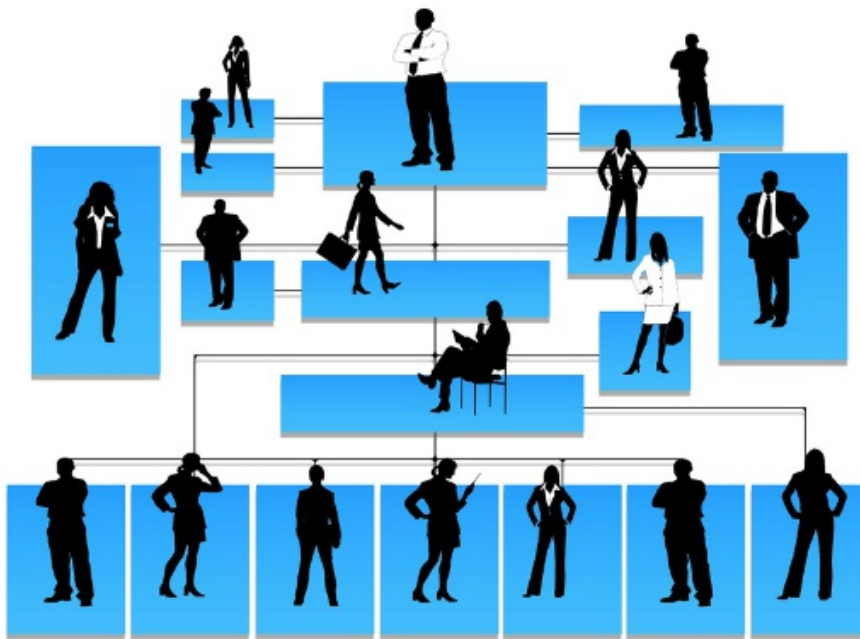
First, expanding numbers of positions for managers and non-academic professionals were the main driver of growth in non-academic staffing. In our sample of 117 universities the largest absolute growth was in the numbers of managers and non-academic professionals. Their numbers rose from just under 32,000 in the academic year 2005/06 to almost 51,000 by 2017/18, an increase of some 60 per cent over 12 years. This group of staff comprised less than a fifth of all non-academic staff in 2005/06 but more than a quarter of them by 2017/18.

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Second, among academics, we found remarkable growth in the numbers of teaching-only staff. Their numbers grew by more than 80 per cent between the academic years 2005/06 and 2018/19 while numbers of 'traditional' teaching and research staff (i.e. lecturers, professors etc who both teach students and conduct research) rose by just 16 per cent over the same period. The increase in numbers of teaching-only staff was particularly apparent among the research-intensive Russell Group universities. These universities had relatively few teaching-only staff among their academic workforces in 2005/06 and there was a general pattern of institutions with historically low proportions of teaching-only staff tending to catch up in recent years.

Explanations

Case studies of six very different universities were undertaken to understand the reasons for these sector-wide trends. For non-academic staff there was little evidence of a carefully-planned long-term strategy by university leaders. Much of the growth appeared to have occurred reactively in order to improve student services and thereby increase student satisfaction ratings. This in turn reflects the way in which, over the last twenty years, the external environment which UK universities face has changed considerably, with growing competition for students and regulatory demands for data on student satisfaction.



The data accordingly show substantial growth in staff employed to deal with all aspects of the ‘student experience’, for instance welfare workers and career advisors. The case study evidence was consistent with the national-level HESA data: potential improvement in ‘the student experience’ was often used as justification for new professional services jobs. Meanwhile, increasing competition for students, and especially overseas students, has led universities to expand their marketing departments.

Overall, changes in the external environment underpin much of the growth of managers and non-academic professional staff over the last twenty years. However, centralisation of professional services was also a recurrent theme in the case study evidence. Senior professional service posts were approved (or not) centrally in all the institutions visited despite senior leadership teams’ lack of expertise on professional service matters and justifications for these roles tended not to be challenged. Institution-wide structural barriers to, and constraints on, upward drift in professional service posts were seldom observed, whereas academic posts and appointments were carefully scrutinised by the centre.

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In the case studies we also sought explanations for the remarkable growth in teaching-only academic staff. Again, there was no evidence of any deliberate top-down strategy by universities here. Growth in the numbers of teaching-only staff was not a component in a well-considered strategic plan, but something which occurred in a more haphazard way, especially as a response to the research funding environment of UK universities. Universities were focused on research rankings and research excellence, particularly towards optimising performance in the government’s ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (REF) review, for which numbers and percentages of ‘research-active’ staff are important.

The way in which the REF impacts on change in the numbers of teaching-only staff is somewhat complex, we found. On the one hand, there is evidence of universities moving staff whose research outputs are poor in number or quality or both onto teaching-only contracts so that they do not count for the purposes of the REF. There was a widespread ratcheting up of numbers of teaching-only staff in the years immediately preceding the 2014 REF and this occurred again in the run-up to the most recent REF exercise.

On the other hand, and especially in research-intensive universities, new teaching-only appointments were also put in place to cover for permanent staff bought out by research commitments or taking up their entitlement to regular sabbaticals. In research-intensive universities, research excellence was a key criterion for appointment. Quite often, posts were not filled easily or at all. Continuing growth in student numbers then ensured that short-term staff, often on teaching-only contracts, were appointed instead.

Implications for the HE Sector

The substantial growth in the total numbers of staff on fixed-term and teaching-only contracts has undoubtedly increased precarity and insecurity amongst academics, especially those in the early stages of their career. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the UK has experienced less of a divisive 'dual labour market' than some other marketised systems, notably the US and Australia. The most plausible explanation for this is the research funding system in the UK, and specifically the REF, which encourages universities to employ those with both teaching and research capabilities and therefore places some limits on the growth of teaching-only staff.

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It is unlikely that the growth in numbers of teaching-only staff can be reversed. What can be done is to integrate teaching-only staff more closely into the academic community and to improve their conditions of work. Some progress on this has been made. Indeed, as numbers have increased so the teaching-only segment of the workforce has become more visible. Some universities have responded, with pressure from unions, by improving working conditions and putting in place promotion pathways for teaching-only staff, as well as better opportunities for moving to 'teaching and research' contracts, which allocate time for research as well as for professional development.

The long-term trend towards ever more senior managers and non-academic professional staff is a cause for concern. Particularly worrying has been the associated reduction in autonomy for academics and departments within a university. Moreover, the changes appear to have occurred almost unnoticed and without being underpinned by any clear strategy. The trend may have slowed, or even reversed, during the pandemic as some support staff were laid off. Whether or not that was just a temporary hiatus remains unclear. Either way, changes in non-academic staffing have received little attention to date and deserve closer scrutiny.

This post draws on the authors' report, [Managers and academics in a centralising sector The new staffing patterns of UK higher education](#).

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