The phoenix is rising! How professional services leadership roles are evolving in academic units to shape the modern university

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The phoenix is rising! How professional services leadership roles are evolving in academic units to shape the modern university

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides a small-scale exploration of the evolvement of leadership roles in higher education academic units (AUs), namely Departments, Schools & Faculties. A literature review provides theoretical examples of the evolution of professional services (PS) staff. Changes in PS leadership roles are also explored alongside the emergence of 'Third Space' professionals whereby staff from the perceived 'binary' construct of HE (academics and PS staff) work together on shared initiatives outside formal structures. Semi-structured interviews with PS leaders working in AUs across the sector highlight a number of key themes. Findings suggest that documented tensions between academics and PS staff have lessened with the focus shifting to 'local' vs 'central' challenges. With identity emerging as an important consideration for Higher Education Professionals (HEPs), the paper calls for a sector wide review of structures and resource allocation models, the development of a new HEP apprenticeship scheme and a rebuilding of the PS throughout HE.

Introduction

Following the Dearing Report (1997) and subsequent introduction of tuition fees, higher education (HE) entered the international market, modifying its image and structures accordingly, adopting a more business-oriented model – a move away from traditional academic leadership (Rushworth et al. 2019). Whilst other public sector organisations, such as the NHS experienced new managerial (NM) 'entryism' in an attempt to professionalise, HE has reshaped itself within existing professional services (PS) hierarchies (Reed 2002).

PS staff have evolved to support the changing UK HE sector. As a result, following a strategic review and consultation of its membership, the Association for University Administrators (AUA), relaunched as The Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) on 18 September 2023 to 'connect and develop the HE professional services community' (AHEP 2023, 1). This is a pivotal moment in the evolution of higher education professionals (HEPs) and an exciting time for the profession as a whole. With the PS phoenix rising from the ashes of 'traditional' universities (Conway 2021), new ideas, experience and leadership roles are emerging. This paper seeks to understand the challenges faced through a review of existing literature and research into the evolution of PS leaders working specifically in departments, faculties and schools – referred to herein as academic units (AUs).

Literature review

Background – professionalisation of higher education

In 2009, the UK government set out a blueprint for the future of HE (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009) seeking to professionalise the sector in light of corporatisation, internationalisation and marketisation (Cornelius-Bell 2022; Munene 2008; Parker 2011) post Dearing (1997). The sector introduced modularisation to offer more flexible and marketable learning 'products' (Morris 2000), whilst the cap on student numbers was removed in 2015 to allow HEIs to secure more revenue in light of reduced government funding (Hillman 2014). Despite marketisation however the UK HE sector continues to be heavily regulated with the Office for Students (Ofs) launching in 2022, following previous oversight by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The 'regulatory burden' experienced by the sector despite these changes includes a lack of understanding of the diversity of the sector as well as the absence of a productive alliance (Universities UK 2024). In addition, with students becoming the 'customers' of higher education, the notion of student experience was born, increasing the demand on the sector to provide a holistic product for those attending university. This demonstrated another seismic shift in the way that HE operates (Pötschulat, Moran, and Jones 2021).

Professionalisation also included a rebranding of administrators to PS staff to reflect this change (Lauwerys 2002; Melling 2019). Despite this, there is increasing confusion about both academic and PS identities (Gordon and Whitchurch 2010). This is conflated by well documented academic and PS tensions (Cornelius-Bell 2022; Deem 2001; Lund Dean et al. 2020; Martin and Sorensen 2014; White, Carvalho, and Sarah 2011) and the increase of managers and 'manager academics' (Deem 2001; Deem and Brehony 2005; Lund Dean et al. 2020; Trowler 2001). PS staff numbers have increased by over 20,000 in the last five years (HESA 2023). With increased discourse around centralisation models (Cullen and Perrewe 1981), the sector is going through significant change (Conway 2021). The birth of new machinery in an outmoded world has therefore increased the need for adaptation of those operating it (Veles and Carter 2016).

The modern university

When considering the metamorphosis of the HE sector, Conway (2021) demonstrated the incredible journey that has taken place since the birth of the 'Second Generation' university and the evolution of HE towards societal influence (Oztel 2020). With a clear trajectory from the 'traditional' idea of a university towards the now dominant 'managerial idea', the emergent 'reframed' idea demarcates the current sector positioning within the macro environment. Oztel (2020) refers to this period as the 'Third Generation' university with expansion and transformation of the sector well positioned to shape the economy and society through entrepreneurship. Conway's 'dismissive' idea of the sector (2021) suggests alternative options are germinating to challenge the dominant and emergent position of universities as we know them. Oztel (2020) refers to this as the 'Fourth Generation' university which can increase societal impact by transforming into 'sustainable universities'. Conway (2021) however, indicates that universities are in danger, with the introduction of more online options (Johns 2021) and the expeditious expansion of Artificial Intelligence (Bhavana and Vijayalakshmi 2022).

Leadership & strategy – translating the 'bigger picture'

Existing academic and PS structures were transformed, moving closer to models adopted by many corporations. The sector saw a bolstering of HEPs, to drive marketing (Corso 2020; Munene 2008; Warwick 2014). With some HEIs developing 'umbrella strategies' (Mintzberg and Waters 1985), a more flexible approach to planning through the notion of 'freedom within a framework' was adopted (Cafaro 2020) whereby

experts in AUs were consulted in the overall delivery of the new HE model (Vogel 2022). In addition, there were changes to the leadership model in HE with academics who had traditionally held a 'large power distance' over administrative staff due to a historic authoritative culture, experiencing a shift to a 'small power distance' where a more equitable culture prevails (Hofstede 2002). This is illustrated through the emergence of more equal treatment across the sector, as the importance of PS expertise became more apparent. 'Dispersed' leadership (Middlehurst 2004) is therefore having a significant impact on the reconstruction of the sector and the role of the PS leader in AUs is therefore ever more important (Bassnett 2005).

Identity and the concept of third space professionals

In order for the modern university to be reborn, it has been necessary to remodel structures and leadership across the sector (Jones and Harvey 2017), refocusing PS roles and identities to support the pace of change (Brown, Bossu, and Denman 2018). Whitchurch (2013) argues that much has been written previously about changes to academic identities, and less about the evolution of professional roles, with Caldwell (2022) highlighting perceptions of 'invisibility' and the need for recognition among PS staff. Recent literature focused on the introduction of a *new* identity – that of 'Third Space' professionals born from the need to evolve through collaboration, cooperation and new modes of working (Gibbs and Kharouf 2022; Jones and Harvey 2017; Middlehurst 2013; Whitchurch 2008, 2013).

The concept of 'Third Space' was developed from the theory of 'socioculturalism' which considers learning and development through social values (Allman 2018). It was applied to post colonialism to understand the 'unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation' (Bhaba 2004, 245) in an otherwise perceived homogeneity and to understand perceived duplexity in geopolitical settings (McAlpine and Hopwood 2009). It can equally be applied to HE through the facilitation of interaction and engagement between academics and professional services staff across traditional boundaries (Lam 2017).

Giddens' political exploration of the 'Third Way' (1998) can also be applied to HE where those traditionally located within the two recognised polarised groups of academics and PS staff come together to form a central approach in order to modernise the sector. The concept of the 'Third Way' was adopted by the UK Labour Party in the late 1990s in an attempt to introduce new possibilities instead of the existing political duality. Whilst this demonstrated some successes, the reforms were controversial and

lacked longevity (Burkitt 2006; Hale et al. 2004; Powell 1999). Similarly, other sociologists believe that 'morphogenesis' is preferable to 'structuration' and the 'Third way' and that Gidden's theory merely results in ambiguity and does not provide concrete answers to solutions, where transparency will (Archer 1982, 1999; Mouzelis 2008; Parker 2000).

Whilst the 'Third Space' (Whitchurch 2008, 2013) creates new possibilities instead of the traditional binary model, it is important to acknowledge that there are further complexities around PS leadership (Vogel 2022). In addition, the notion of local vs central support services and the subsequent allocation of resources impacts power and relationships (Gibbs and Kharouf 2022), signalling a manifold heterogeneity of HEPs working across the sector. It also suggests the need for a more formal structured approach to the evolution of leadership roles (Archer 1982, 1999; Mouzelis 2008; Parker 2000; Szekeres 2011).

AU leadership and central services

The emergence of professional services leaders within AUs has coincided with perceptions of NM entryism and the impact this had on other areas of the public sector (Middlehurst 2004). There is an assumption through some of the resultant literature that the increase of managers in AUs mirrors other public sector models, is watering down academia and should be resisted (Deem 2001; Deem and Brehony 2005; Lund Dean et al. 2020; Trowler 2001). It is important however to consider the impact of these changes on the HE sector specifically. Clark (1998) talked about the need for a number of structural changes including a 'strengthened steering core' and 'stimulated academic heartland'. With much written about leadership of the former (Cornelius-Bell 2022; Munene 2008; Parker 2011), there is little information on how the latter constituency is evolving. In addition, with internal governance changes and evolving structures, it is important to understand the impact this has on the different units of the modern university (Middlehurst 2004). With a range of resource allocation models and centralisation initiatives impacting this work (Jarzabkowski 2002), the picture is incredibly complex. There is therefore a need to further understand the role of AU leaders in HE and how they are reshaping the modern university.

Methodology

An interpretivist paradigm was deployed to conduct inductive research into the evolution of PS leadership roles in HE AUs specifically. This approach was adopted to discern the impact of changes across HE by speaking directly to those working in this area of the sector and asking them *how* they think things are changing and *why* (Kuper, Reeves, and Levinson 2008). In order to further develop nuance around the 'reinvention' of AU leadership specifically, the principles of the 'Grounded Theory' (GT) framework were adopted. This facilitated a closer examination of the HE landscape in practice (Glaser and Strauss 1999). Explored through the lens of 'Third Space Professionals' (Whitchurch 2008, 2013), respondents were invited to consider sectoral transformations (Deem 2001; Deem and Brehony 2005; Lund Dean et al. 2020; McCann, Hutchison, and Adair 2022; Rushworth et al. 2019; Trowler 2001) and initiatives where a 'third' category of delivery may be emerging (Whitchurch 2008, 2013).

'Semi Structured Interviews' were selected as the research instrument to allow as much flexibility in data collection as possible. With a combination of fixed questions and emergent ones, the topic was explored in more depth to allow respondents to share their experiences directly. These were also conducted in a varied order according to responses, to allow conversation to flow organically according to the respondents experiences (Galleta 2013). Questions were structured around the transformation of leadership roles in AUs, experience of Third Space working, relations between central services and AUs, academic/PS relationships, identity of professional services staff and how AU leadership roles should continue to evolve to shape the modern university.

Volunteers were invited to participate in the research from networks developed through AHEP and the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS). Respondents were also sought from connections made through collaborations across UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The primary objective was to interview a pool of participants in leadership roles from a variety of AUs in UK HEIs, to reach as wide an audience as possible, whilst maintaining a focused approach. A sample of seven respondents were selected from a comprehensive geographical compass, with a target of 50% RG and 50% non-RG AU leaders in order to seek opinions and compare views across the different types of institution (Temple et al. 2016). Whilst the sample is small, the demographic representation was important to gain as much insight as possible across the field. All seven of the respondents interviewed worked in social sciences, with four working as AU leaders in business schools. Whilst this sample was therefore heavily weighted in certain disciplines, there was a balance of four from RG institutions and three working outside of the RG. Three respondents worked in faculties, three in schools and one in a Department. On balance, whilst it would be useful to understand potential differences between disciplines, the variety of experience across the sector provided a useful platform of understanding with an opportunity for further research.

Primary data was collected from respondents using transcripts of Zoom interviews to capture answers to questions and additional ideas which emerged. Zoom was selected as a vehicle instead of in person interviews as it allowed a wider 'reach', without the barrier of travel. In consideration of the ethical process and implications of the research, a number of aspects were evaluated. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions, reassurance was provided that comments would not be attributed to any individual or institution and would only be used to gain a broad perspective of sector similarities and differences of approach. It was important to the research that interviewees felt comfortable to express their views without concerns around 'moral identity' (Ruodan, Aquino, and Freeman 2008). The principle of informed consent (Faden and Beauchamp 1986) was upheld, fully briefing respondents and providing written information in advance of the interviews.

Findings

The transformation of leadership roles in AUs

All respondents acknowledged that the sector has experienced a radical metamorphosis in recent years, with new models of governance and positioning (Rushworth et al. 2019), permeating throughout HEIs. With differing fee levels introduced for 'home' and international students, the market became segmented according to rankings, reputation and brand identity. One respondent commented that:

> There's definitely a move to be seen as market leaders, whereas before, I guess the aim was to be an institution of excellence, or certainly promoting research.

Participants reported involvement in more strategic conversations, with plans developed to introduce more HEPs to deliver new strategies. In addition, new academic leadership roles were created to develop an enhanced strategic approach across both academic and PS disciplines. One respondent stated that:

> We had a restructure across all faculty and introduced Associate Deans and Associate Heads of Schools … the postholders understand that they've been brought in to be more strategic.

With strategy now taking centre stage in the new marketised HEI, AU leaders began setting objectives alongside their academic counterparts (Corso 2020; Munene 2008; Warwick 2014). For example,

> We are being pulled into more strategic conversations … .previously I don't necessarily think there's always been that voice at the table.

Relations between academics and PS staff

Academic/PS leadership

With the emergence of clearly defined academic & PS leadership roles (Gajda 2004; Kehm and Teichler 2013), all respondents reported positive improvements. Whilst there was acknowledgement that this often depends on individuals and relationships, there was evidence of synergies across all responses suggesting that a 'strategic alliance' has formed (Gajda 2004). This substantiates Whitchurch's theory of Third Space working (2013) whereby partnerships are formed through conflict resolution, cooperation and a new way of working (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2001; Ohtsubo and Yamaura 2022; Palanski 2012; Prochaska and DiClemente 1983). For example,

> Previously Department Managers were more like high level Department Administrators, whereas now we are all members of the of the Department's leadership team.

With academic leadership roles tending to serve specific terms of office, the interviewees reported that PS leadership roles were often seen as stable and reliable, with one respondent likening the relationship to that of the civil service:

> You are a permanent Private Secretary to the changing Minister every three to five years.

Academic/PS culture

Despite the dominant discourse focusing primarily on academic and PS tensions (Conway 2000; Gornall 1988; Kehm and Teichler 2013) all respondents indicated significant advancements in academic/PS relations. The three key contributory factors identified in the findings are as follows:

Collaboration. In the 'war' against COVID, the spirit of 'mucking in' adopted by most HEIs, resulted in a real need for collaboration, which diminished behavioural norms due to the urgency and necessity of working together (Johns 2021). Several respondents attributed this to a thawing of relations. One person said:

> I think our academic staff really realised how hard our professional services worked.

Expertise. With a remodelling of the sector, PS roles have been repositioned and reinvented (Corso 2020; Parker 2011; Warwick 2014). Whilst there was acknowledgment from all respondents that there was still work to do, for AU PS leaders at least, the tensions between academics and PS staff referred to in existing literature (Garnett et al. 2011; Martin and Sorensen 2014) seems to be declining. For example,

> It has been a huge piece of work to get those relationships working well. There was a stage where professional services staff wouldn't have gone into the Staff Common Room if academics were in there. During COVID we had a very difficult time, and the only way it was going to work was by working together.

Professionalisation. The HE sector is breeding a new generation of professionals who are passionate and

enthusiastic about the future. Three interviewees outlined apprenticeship programmes running at their institution, designed to train HEPs across the entire university operation. For example,

> About 2 years ago we came up with a higher education leadership scheme. What we're aiming for is a kind of fast-track career in higher education on the professional services side. They will go for six month placements – three in the school and one within the wider college somewhere, just to give them that kind of a bigger picture exposure as well.

> We've got our Senior Leadership MBA that's run by the institution, and it's an apprenticeship course. So you are very much encouraged to go on it. An awful lot of the staff have done it and they've learned a lot from it.

Relations between central services and AUs

There was a strong feeling among all interviewees that one of the current primary concerns is the culture and relationship between PS staff in central services and 'local' PS staff in AUs (Gibbs and Kharouf 2022). All respondents indicated that they had experienced tensions with central teams, with the success of collaboration between the two stakeholder groups dependent on individuals and relationships. For example,

> It's hierarchy in reverse. I work quite hard to bridge divides and I have more success with some Divisions than I do with others. It is a lot of hard work and I get frustrated when I don't see it reciprocated the other way.

Resource Allocation models (RAM) and centralisation initiatives now dominate the sector originating for the need to save costs due to increased pressure on finances (Jarzabkowski 2002; Office for Students 2024). The subsequent constraints however appear to further fracture the much documented relationships between academics and PS staff (Garnett et al. 2011; Martin and Sorensen 2014). For example,

> Over the last few years we've gone through quite heavy centralisation of some professional service areas. So I think probably, when you do that, you get a natural disconnect with the academics

With a strong need for identity and community across HE, the findings support existing literature on the tensions caused by increased bureaucratisation materialising from a market driven sector (Cornelius-Bell 2022; Deem et al. 2009; Lund Dean et al. 2020; White, Carvalho, and Sarah 2011). For example,

> The more central you have your services, the less satisfaction you get from them.

The differences derived from the research however suggest that the primary concern for all AU leaders has pivoted away from academic/PS tensions between to central and local relationship issues caused by rules, regulations and RAM (Cullen and Perrewe 1981). For example,

> The actual friction comes about between our Directors and academics in Schools.

> Leadership will need to be able to lobby and negotiate, perhaps a bit more than they have in the past, because you are always fighting for resources.

The third space

Despite all participants being asked directly about third space working through communities of practice or other academic/PS joint initiatives, none of them provided evidence of working in this way. One participant however stated that:

> For learning and teaching, they really like to bring together the blend of academic roles and professional roles.

This suggests that the Third Space is something which is evolving for particular roles in HE (Gordon and Whitchurch 2010; McIntosh and Nutt 2022; Veles and Carter 2016; Whitchurch 2008, 2013), but does not seem obvious for AU leadership roles. What was much more apparent however was that where joint working happens, leadership roles are very clearly defined and it is the notion of *representation* for both academic and PS staff which is more important. This is demonstrated in the following two examples from different respondents,

> I represent quite a few people on those boards and get pulled into working groups of health and safety and timetabling and things like that outside of our own faculty and schools.

> Your role is just trying to represent. Not your own department, but thinking about the impact on all departments, or if there would be something that departments would have a stake in, or a vested interest in.

PS identity

HEPs are rising from the ashes of the 'traditional' university to face new emerging challenges, as outlined in the literature (Caldwell 2022; Conway 2021; Melling 2019; Oztel 2020; Whitchurch 2013). Identity is an important factor in shaping HEPs with all respondents commenting on different job titles having different meanings. One interviewee noted that:

> My Head of Business Operations role is actually the same level as an Associate Director for Education in, I think [institutions named], but because my title is 'Head', I could tell just from conversation that they probably thought I was junior to them.

This sector wide confusion is reportedly causing displacement across PS at a time when clarity and

consistency are key to building on the progress identified previously (Caldwell 2019).

PS leadership evolution

All respondents applauded the need for local leaders to adapt, move forward and embed changes. For example,

> What does education look like in the next 3, 5, 10 years? How are we going to deliver it? That needs to inform what we need. And we also need to hear from students where they go for different functions, what functions should an academic department provide for you? And is the way that we're delivering all these different things the best way in terms of value for money and student experience.

Developing a 'Fourth Generation' university requires co-creation from all HE stakeholders (Oztel 2020). The evolution of PS roles is therefore crucial in embracing the changes necessary to retain positionality, remain cost effective and build a sustainable future.

Conclusion

PS leaders in AUs are becoming recognised as crucial change makers in HE, as evidenced in the findings. Whilst this change represents a significant milestone (Conway 2012; Johns 2021; Martin and Sorensen 2014), it is important to understand the limitations of the data. With the sample for this study focusing solely on a small number of PS AU leaders, it would be useful to conduct further research across other areas of the HE demographic to understand if this opinion is shared across role types. The data demonstrated that all interviewees had challenging relationships with central teams, which was the main cause of frustration. AUs have been described as 'not a single community of practice but a constellation of them' (Knight and Trowler 2001, 8) which can equally be applied across the whole university diaspora. Further research into the effectiveness of centralisation models is essential to provide a deeper understanding of the issues (Gibbs and Kharouf 2022). Whilst these are often popular as a perceived cost saving exercise, the research findings demonstrate that RAMs cause numerous implications for the sector. In addition, understanding the impact of the pandemic on relationships across the sector is something which should be explored through multiple lenses to gain a true understanding of the demographic changes taking place.

Recommendations

The research has identified a number of recommendations for consideration by the sector and HEIs as evolution continues to create new challenges and possibilities:

Strengthen academic and PS culture

It has already been acknowledged that there are limitations from the data of this study, but nonetheless there is some evidence of improved relations between academics and PS staff. It would be really useful to analyse this trend further to gain a broader understanding of the changes across the sector. In addition, the aspects of joint leadership, collaboration, acknowledgment of each others areas of expertise and the professionalisation of AUs are all elements derived from the findings which AUs across the sector can build on to further strengthen and improve the culture.

Develop the PS leaders for the future

HE needs to learn positive lessons outlined by respondents who are running leadership training schemes. By developing university wide apprenticeship programmes similar to those outlined in the findings, a new breed of HEP can evolve. Staff can be developed with a broader understanding of the multiple components of HE operations and strategy. Working across different functions should also improve the notion of community for both central and local teams, developing much needed collegiality through an appreciation of the different components which contribute to overall missions and visions.

Improve PS identities

There are concerns across the sector on the notion of identity for PS staff. It is important that the sector works together to improve this in the same way that academic staff have fairly standardised role types. A sector wide review should take place into job titles and structures to improve the sense of belonging for those whose positions mean so much to the future of HE. Whilst there will inevitably always be nuances due to the differences in shape and structure across the sector, an attempt at some form of standardisation would be beneficial to HE as a profession.

Re-establish communities, review resource allocation and structure

HEIs should review PS structures and resource allocation, examining success stories and areas of difference. It is essential that reinvention, definition, identity and transparency are central to such a review, identifying recommendations of best practice. Whilst there is evidence of some Third Space working across specific areas of the sector, the core also needs strengthening. We must not forget the need

to build academic heartlands (Clark 1998) however and need to re-establish a sense of community across the whole university to continue evolving.

With rapid change happening across the sector, it is important that we take time to truly reflect on what we have learnt from the past, to work in the present and plan for the future. We need to understand how the pandemic changed working practices and how this is reflected in our cultural composition alongside marking and assessment boycotts, the introduction of AI and geopolitics. By doing this and 'continually morphing … the symbol of the phoenix will be reborn over and over again' (Leafloor 2021, 1).

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

David Meech Mazumdar has worked in higher education for over fifteen years in a number of different roles in both central services and academic units. He is currently Department Manager, Strategic Planning & Development for the London School of Economics and Political Science's Department of Management. David is passionate about higher education and strives to work with a range of colleagues across the sector to help transform policy and practice as it changes at great pace. David has a BA (Hons) in Drama, Film & Television Studies from Brunel University and a MSc in Higher Education Administration, Management and Leadership from Nottingham Trent University. David's MSc research was given the 'Outstanding professional services research, which advances leadership' award in 2024.

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