Journal of Higher Education Management, **37**(1), 24-35 (ISSN 2640-7515).

"People Don't Understand What Our Role Is, It Is Definitely Seen as an Inferior Job to an Academic": Perceptions on Relationships Between Professional Services and Academic Staff in the UK

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Introduction

There is limited research regarding the relationship between academic and professional services staff within higher education. There has recently been a surge in research coming from Australian academics, (Bossu and Brown, 2018; Szekeres and Heywood, 2018; Veles et al., 2019) but this has not been replicated within Britain. Much of what is available has been written from an academic perspective (Mcinnis, 1998; Allen-Collinson, 2006; Graham and Regan, 2016). Yet the traditional notion of the divide between professional services and academics has been prevalent for many years (Coe and Heitner, 2013).

Hobson et al. (2018) argue that academics feel professional services staff do not understand the pressures they face and can be critical of the role professional services undertake, and professional services feel that academic staff belittle their role from a perceived position of power. They state 'being a professional or an academic are both a role within a university, and an entrenched identity. These roles are also linked to strongly delineated and prescribed hierarchical relationships' (ibid:316). The silos in which both professional services and academics reside in have been around for several years. It appears that a lack of understanding about the roles they both undertake contributes to this challenging relationship.

This paper, taken from my doctoral work, examines the relationship between professional services staff and academic staff. I chose to utilize what Holland et al. (1998) call 'figured worlds' as a conceptual framework in which to investigate the sociocultural concepts of space, self-authoring, and identity in practice.

Context

Higher education has faced huge changes and threats in the last fifty years. The Robbins Committee report of 1963 looked at the expansion of higher education and reported that anyone who wanted to, should be able to attend university, regardless of their background or financial status (Robbins, 1963). While the report called for the expansion of higher education, its authors could not have imagined the size of this growth over the next forty years. At the time of the report's publication there were 216,000 higher education students; by 1990, this had risen to over a million (Nixon, 1996) and by 2018/2019 there were 2,383,970 (*Higher Education Statistics Agency*, 2018). The increase in student numbers and higher education institutions brought with it increased funding and therefore more regulations and reporting on public spending (Brown et al., 2018). The Dearing Report (1997) called for the introduction of tuition fees to cover the increase in student numbers.

The Future of Higher Education White Paper (2003) argued for more access for students from a widening participation background along with the elusive 50% target for participation in higher education for 18-30 year olds.

The introduction of tuition fees and the subsequent increases to the current level of £9,250 (as of September 2021) created a market economy, both for students, who began to see themselves as consumers, but also institutions who were bidding for public funding, and industry involvement (Henkel, 2010). It also meant that universities became partly responsible for their own survival. Henkel (ibid:5) writes, 'Higher education, now carrying new burdens of responsibility for their futures, was increasingly impelled into markets and quasi-markets: for more selective and conditional public funding, for new sources of income'. Higher education institutions now became quasi-businesses with paying customers. Readings (1996:22) in his seminal text *The University in Ruins* writes:

> Quality is not the ultimate issue, but excellence soon will be, because it is the recognition that the university is not just *like* a corporation; it is a corporation. Students in the University of Excellence are not *like* customers; they *are* customers. [author emphasis]

While Readings is writing mainly about North American and European higher education in the Nineties, this consumerism within higher education is now embedded within the UK system. Readings (ibid:38-39) goes on to say that the decision to allow polytechnics to rebrand as universities in the early Nineties was based on a business model for expanding a market:

> The decision was not primarily motivated by concern for the content of what is taught in the universities or polytechnics … the sudden redenomination of polytechnics as universities is best understood as an *administrative* move: the breaking down of a barrier to circulation and to market expansion. [author emphasis]

This expansion did come with a caveat on student numbers due to the limit in government funding, until of course the rise of tuition fees.

When the student number cap was lifted in 2015/2016, it enabled universities to recruit more students and created a buyers' market for students who were now able (to some extent) to have more choice over where they wanted to study. The rise of neoliberalism within higher education is too large a topic to cover within this paper, but it is important to recognize that by creating a marketized system this impacted on the structures, power dynamics and staff within institutions (Olssen and Peters, 2007). Murphy (2020:30) argues the underlying ideology was that 'competition, enabled via a marketized higher education context, would help drive up standards in universities, and deliver a more responsive and consumer orientated institution'. This, in turn, required a number of professional administrators to oversee a customer focused university.

Changes to roles in professional services began to occur: they no longer played a subsidiary role but became a major part of university life and its structure. Brown et al. (2018) explain the diversification and plurality of roles that began to emerge including, teaching and learning, quality

administrators, external relations, academic development, and research administrators to name a few. This diversification sat alongside an increase in both academic and professional services staff.

Theoretical Framework

> Holland et al. (1998:52) describe figured worlds as: *a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others*.

The culturally constructed world of academia is historical, and identities have been developed over a long period of time. However, I would suggest that these identities are constantly in flux due to the ever-changing nature of academia. Holland intimates identities have been established during the evolution of higher education, and argues 'In the world of academia, being verbally aggressive may be a sign of high status and position' (ibid:131). While this statement can be considered a generalisation, identities of both academic and professional services have developed organically as the system evolved. For Holland 'identities are enacted and produced, and individuals take up positions in accordance with the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power, deference, and entitlement, social affiliation and distance' (ibid:127). If the identities of professional services and academic staff are positioned in terms of power dynamics, is this why I perceive professional services to be both in a different figured world, but also below the academic figured world in terms of hierarchy?

Holland et al's. (1998) concept of figured worlds and identity-making can be used to try to explore the constructed world of higher education and the identities of those that reside in this space, they argue; 'People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are' (ibid:3).

Methods

I undertook semi-structured interviews with ten participants. Five professional services staff members and five academic staff. All staff work within an academic school within a university in the North West of England and were in different roles across the school. I used convenience sampling to access participants. Convenience sampling is defined as accessing those participants available and easily accessible to the researcher (Wragg, 2002; Cohen et al., 2011).

Interviews were transcribed manually and thematically analyzed. By coding and thematically analyzing the data I ensured I understood the themes in the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006:79) state 'thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data… it describes your data set in (rich) detail'.

I was also aware of the interpretation with which I analyzed each interview. The subject positionality is important in terms of the balance of language and power (Fairclough, 2001). Fairclough (ibid) highlights Foucault's work on socially constructed discourse which links into the figured world theory of positionality, that we are both the author and product of our words. Halliday (2002:51) states 'meaning cannot be reported in a way that is independent of the observer

because she or he has to understand what is being said and this implicates them in the subject of their research'. By acknowledging my choices and being aware of potential bias, I am limiting the impact this may have on the research.

There was an element of data triangulation in the choice of academic participants, in the sense that I wanted a variety of participants to gain a broader understanding of feelings about professional services. Data triangulation refers to using multiple methods, sources or data checking to ensure data validity (Carter et al., 2014; Miles and Huberman, 2014). Bryman, (2016:697) defines it as 'The use of more than one method or source of data … so that findings may be cross-checked'. Again, with the professional services staff, although I was limited by the number who responded to the request, I managed to get a diverse cross section from the school. By including both professional services staff and academic staff within my interviews, I am triangulating perspectives from different groups of university employees to tease out their figured worlds, which enables me as a researcher to see how they align or differ from each other's perspectives and my own. This gives a unique perspective and one that is rarely covered in the literature, where only one of the occupational groups is used as a research subject.

I was very conscious of being an insider researcher. The participants could perceive my research as already biased due to the fact I am a member of professional services and am undertaking interviews around the professional identity of professional services staff. Gibb's (2008) discusses reactivity and the influence the researcher, a question or even body language could have on a participant. He goes on to argue that participants may respond to questions 'based on how they want to see themselves' (ibid:695). In the case of this research, it could also be that participants answered questions based on how they wanted to be perceived by a member of professional services, or by someone they work alongside. Teusner (2016) states that with a clear methodology and clarity regarding how data is collected and analyzed, validity concerns can be alleviated.

Professional Services Perceptions on Relationships with Academics

Professional services staff have very different relationships with academic staff depending on whom they work with and in what capacity. The relationships are based on how they work together and how they communicate with each other.

Professional services staff who work with academics directly on student administration show similarities with the research by Szekeres (2004) and Allen-Collinson (2006) who state professional services staff feel invisible working within higher education. The relationships can be described as fractious and again, certain individuals and in some cases teams, are responsible for the difficulties that professional services staff feel. According to one participant relationships are individualistic and department specific:

> It's different with different individuals but more importantly with different groups of individuals, cause some teams are lovely and friendly and treat you like part of their team and obviously understand and appreciate what you do. Especially if they really hate doing admin and they're great and then certain other teams have got this superiority thing going on and they can be rude, and they can be awful. I think different individuals would not be like that if there wasn't a culture of it within that

> department because where there isn't a culture of it, they are pretty much all lovely.

The individualistic and context dependent fractious relations the interviewee describes are echoed by Allen-Collinson (2009:946) in her research who states, 'As with all occupational (and more general) social contexts, there are positive and negative dimensions to work relationships'. Mcinnis (1998) argues professional services staff felt academic staff attitudes were detrimental to their relationships and over 75% of those interviewed in his research, (both professional services and academic staff) felt the relationship between professional services and academic staff was negative. Although what Mcinnis (ibid) does not articulate is the individualistic relationship between professional services and academic staff, just that his participants felt the relationship was negative.

The idea that departments can behave in a certain way towards professional services staff is interesting. This links to what Holland et al. (1998) term 'self-authoring'. They argue, using Bakhtin, that the words we use are not just our own, 'the author, in everyday life as in artistic work, creates by orchestration, by arranging overheard elements, themes and forms' (ibid:171). This would indicate there is limited room within the departments the participant above is talking about, to self-author. The language the academic staff use when interacting with professional services staff seems to have been internalized. Bakhtin (1981:299) although discussing authors writes, 'The author does not speak in a given language … but he speaks, as it were, through a language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates'. This shared language then permeates through to new academic staff members who then perpetuate the challenging relationship the department has with professional services staff, or at least the ones that the participant above works with.

The figured world of academia has its own discourse and part of this is an opinion on staff, whoever they are. It will not be shared by all who inhabit this world, but it is passed on through dialogue. New additions to this world are enveloped into it with shared resources and language (White et al., 2014). Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' can be referenced here, the 'socialized body' (Bourdieu, 1998:81) he refers to is demonstrated. The sharing of language links to the localized figured world. Holland et al. (1998) reference Bourdieu's (1977) work on Algerian peasants to illustrate the localized figured world, positional identity and symbolic capital, where honor is given to those of a higher credence. Although higher education is far from Algerian peasants, it demonstrates the way in which localized figured worlds carry on traditions and how social positionality is important.

Perceptions on the Professional Services/Academic Divide

As noted in the introduction, the last twenty years has seen a rise in research evidence relating to a divide between professional services and academic staff (Mcinnis, 1998; Seyd, 2000; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2006, 2010; Gray, 2015; Hobson et al., 2018). Mcinnis (1998:162) referenced the idea of professional services being the 'poor relation' and not worthy of research or scholarship. Wallace and Marchant (2011) in their research on gender, linked the divide to organizational theory, academics are the business and professional services are indirectly linked to the business. Wallace and Marchant (ibid) seem to be stating that professional services appear on the periphery of higher education and are therefore not seen as important. They are not a core part of the university and are perceived as less valuable.

The divide appears to be socially constructed, created through differing views and siloed working. It perpetuates itself through the continued idea that professional services are in the shadow of academic staff and not perceived as equals in terms of their contribution or value.

One respondent felt that professional services, contractually, were not given the same benefits as academic staff, thereby contributing to a divide between the two:

> On a basic level they get more annual leave then us, they're generally kind of better paid than us, that's like levels I suppose.

Academic staff have advantages that professional services staff do not. This is echoed by Whitchurch's (2010a:173) research:

> where professional staff and faculty work side by side in a department … staff without academic contracts may not have the same rights as their academic colleagues in relation to, for instance, intellectual property rights or study leave.

The lack of development for professional services staff was noted by two of the professional service interviewees:

> It is lacking here for professional services. Development is really, really, poor, it's really poor.

> If I was starting out now, then I think there would be a lack of the university's training.

However, one professional services member of staff argued the divide is narrowing:

> I think the divide between academic and admin isn't as great as it used to be, there was an absolute definite.

The idea that the culture of higher education perpetuates and continues the notion of a professional services/academic divide is a demonstration of the way figured worlds are formed. Holland et al. writes:

> People have the propensity to be drawn to, recruited for, and formed in these worlds, and to become active in and passionate about them. People's identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically in these "as if" worlds. (1998:49)

As staff within higher education get drawn into the cultures that exist and the identities created, it can be difficult to change perceived notions of the divide. Identities within these worlds become entrenched by those who reside in them. Although, given that improvements appear to be marginal, it is interesting to think what it would take to bridge the gap that some professional services and academic staff believe exist.

Academic staff had differing views on the divide between the two spheres, and even whether the divide exists. One academic participant stated that, while she personally does not think there is a divide between the two parties, she could see how this perception was possible.

> I do get the feeling that there is this historical divide and potentially there is with some people, and I think you do get the feeling that there is tension sometimes. I can certainly see why, because I think sometimes especially when I did go to certain meetings when I was interim director, there is a lot of talk about academic this, academic that, academic that. You do think, 'well, what about professional services?' so a lot of decisions are taken and talked about, about the development of academics but you think 'what about everybody else, though?

It is the perception here that is important, while some academic staff recognize that the divide is exasperated by the idea of academic needs coming first, it is how this is perceived by professional services staff that adds to them feeling forgotten about or second best.

Academic Staff Perceptions on Relationships with Professional Services Staff

When asked about their relationships with school professional services, the five academics interviewed all mentioned positive relationships and several reiterated how close they were, again, like the professional services staff, specific individuals were mentioned as well as teams of staff:

> I think it's good because I think people know how you are, the way you work, and you know how the people work so it's a bit more of a family

> I literally speak to them all on a daily basis. I mean with school and the person I deal with in that role, literally I'm either on the phone or emailing her like every single day. I could not do without that person; the whole department would not run without that person therefore everything wouldn't happen

This evidence of some positive relationships contradicts research by Seyd (2000), Lewis (2014) and Feather (2015) who argue the relationship between the two is strained due to academics believing that professional services staff are attempting to manage them and impose bureaucratic systems and processes on them which impede on their research time.

Lewis (2014) argues the rise of the neoliberal management within higher education has changed the status of both professional services staff and academics, perhaps de-professionalizing the latter. Feather (2015) counteracts this by stating Lewis is demanding greater administrative control over academic staff and points out that the two groups are very different from each other. The argument between the two is demonstrative of the whole relationship and divide between the two spheres and why the identities of the two appear to belong in separate figured worlds within higher education. Whitchurch (2012:4) summarizes the debate:

> There has been … a tendency for both academic and professional services to see the other as more powerful, and themselves as marginalized. This sense of exclusion, together with perceptions of fragmentation and de-professionalization, has

contributed to a binary view of academic and non-academic activities, roles and identities.

The responses from academics indicate a positive working relationship, one that is familial and in constant contact. Perhaps this is how the relationships moving forward will start to improve. Holland et al's. (1998) research into Nepalese women and the constraints on their gender, identifies how they were able to author new identities and a new sense of self by the art of song. They used the lyrics to challenge current practice and discourse. Both academics and professional services staff could benefit from space to understand their identity and their perceived collective identity to help author more productive ways of working (where required) and improve on their current relationships. I accept this is an idealistic view. I imagine trying to find the time to navigate relationships and understand roles is challenging in a climate where everyone appears to feel overworked. I do not think it would be high on a priority list for either occupational group.

Discussion and Further Research

The research and interviews with professional services participants demonstrated that negative relationships were based around individuals in an academic team. There were several examples of great relationships by professional services, but as expected, it was the negative ones that caused the most discussion.

Frustration at both their role and a lack of understanding by academics of the pressures that professional services face caused negative feelings. The constant changes higher education is going through and the nature of the student as customer has affected the roles that professional services undertake.

Most professional services and academics acknowledged the divide between the two groups. The most obvious difference between the two was the lack of training and development given to professional services, particularly now the academic career pathway is being established for academic career progression. This appeared to give rise to a level of frustration and a feeling of being ‘less than’. This was also acknowledged by several academic staff who spoke of a culture of academic staff being the more important occupational group and professional services not being considered when decisions are made. In my experience these decisions can include increasing academic staff numbers as student numbers increase without the equivalent rise in professional services staff and internal restructures and office moves without consultation. There is a need to explore this area further alongside the rise of the marketization of the higher education institution. This marketization places bureaucratic demands and reporting on both academics and professional services and adds to the feeling by academics of the demise of their academic autonomy.

The difficult relationships and feelings of academic advantage in certain areas did not come as a surprise. It also reflects the literature on the topic, in terms of professional services often being invisible (Szekeres, 2004; Akerman, 2020). Putting in development and career progression for professional services may help with this feeling of invisibility but it would also benefit the institution by upskilling current staff. The higher education sector needs to value all its staff to get the best from them. Acknowledging the importance of different roles and overtly trying to improve relationships should help improve staff perceptions of difference.

Overall, academic staff felt they had a good relationship with school professional services. By school, this means the staff they deal with regularly regarding the students they teach. They felt they could rely on them, and one participant called them ‘family’.

The idea of individualistic and performance-based relationships is something I have witnessed at my current institution, and I would imagine across higher education. Academic staff have a lot of pressure on them, and it makes sense that they rely on the professional services staff who they know can deliver results.

There is a clear value in having positive relationships for academics with school professional services staff. The academic staff indicated that knowing who they could count on to help them was extremely valuable. They also acknowledged that saying ‘thank you’ goes some way to demonstrate their appreciation but conversely admitted that professional services may not feel respected in their role.
Although academics felt the relationship was positive overall, they struggled to articulate the role of professional services. A number used the word support yet were almost embarrassed about it as they know professional services do more than that but could not explain what that was. There was an acknowledgment there was a large element of teamwork between the two groups.

The research findings indicate relationships between both occupational groups are difficult at times. This implies more work needs to be undertaken by the university to signal the importance of professional services and the roles they undertake so they feel more valued.

Negative interactions can make them feel inferior and the divide between the two groups can exacerbate this. Although academic staff state their relationship with school professional services is good overall, there is obviously a disconnect as professional services staff do not always feel the same. This communication problem is something that needs addressing. Enhancing the relationship between the two and a clearer understanding of the roles they undertake and the pressures they face may go some way to improving the day-to-day interactions. The historical notion of the divide between the two is a concept that appears to be ingrained into those who work within higher education. However, providing similar benefits and development opportunities would indicate an attempt by the institution to recognize the unevenness of the current situation. There is a clear craving in some professional services staff for promotion and development, but they see this within the setting of their current institution. The frustration lies with the lack of opportunity for professional services development.

This research was a small case study within a single institution and more research needs to be undertaken across the sector to understand how far these findings translate. Further understanding not just school but also central services relationships with academic staff would help increase the knowledge in this area. As working practices change in a post-pandemic era, the considerations for new ways of working will also need to be factored into the relationships between all parties within higher education.

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