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SHIFTING IDENTITIES, BLURRING BOUNDARIES: The Changing Roles of Professional Managers in Higher Education*

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on earlier reviews by the author of the changing roles and identities of contemporary professional staff in UK higher education (Whitchurch, 2004; 2006a; 2006b), and describes an empirical study that was undertaken between 2004 and 2007. It progresses the argument that the generic terms 'administration' and 'management' no longer do justice to the activities of these staff, and uses the concept of identity to develop four categories of *bounded*, *cross-boundary*, *unbounded* and *blended professionals*. Via these categories it is shown how individuals are not only interpreting their given roles more actively, but are also moving laterally across boundaries to create new professional spaces, knowledges and relationships. The paper goes on to introduce the concept of *third space* as an emergent territory between academic and professional domains, in which *unbounded* and *blended professionals*, particularly, are likely to work. It considers the implications of these developments for both institutions and individuals, and makes some comparisons with parallel groups of staff in Australia and the United States. Finally, it proposes that *third space* working is suggestive of future trends in professional identities, which may increasingly coalesce with those of academic colleagues who undertake project- and management oriented roles.

As higher education institutions, and their workforces, have expanded and diversified to meet the demands of contemporary environments, boundaries are being breached between, for instance, functional areas, professional and academic activity, and internal and external constituencies. In particular, broadly based, extended projects such as student transitions, community partnership, and professional practice have emerged to create a 'third space' between professional and academic domains, requiring contributions from a range of staff. In this space, the concept of administrative service has become re-oriented towards one of partnership with academic colleagues and the multiple constituencies with whom institutions interact. However, while considerable attention has been paid to the impact of a changing policy environment on academic identities (Henkel, 2000; Becher and Trowler, 2001; Barnett, 2005), the implications for professional staff have been less clearly articulated. The aim of the study described in this paper has been to achieve a more nuanced understanding of professional staff identities than is conveyed by the generic terms 'administration' or 'management'.

Contexts

The study builds on a literature review that was published by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in 2006, entitled *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures* (Whitchurch, 2006a).¹ As noted in this review, the terms 'administration' and 'management' not only lack precision, but are contested in an

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¹ Available at <http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html/>.

academic environment, administration for its association with unwanted bureaucracy, and management for its association with what is perceived as an erosion of academic autonomy as institutions respond to competitive markets and government accountability requirements. Moreover, as the capacity of staff expands and diversifies to cope with the ongoing demands on institutions, professional roles and identities are subject to continual revision. The situation is, therefore, more dynamic and complex than organisation charts and job descriptions would suggest.

As noted in the literature review (Whitchurch, 2006a), a lack of understanding about the roles and identities of professional staff has been fostered by the absence of a precise vocabulary to describe staff who increasingly, for instance:

- Have academic credentials such as Master's and doctoral level qualifications, or a teaching or research background in the college sector.
- Work in teams dealing with institutional initiatives that require a range of specialist, academic, and policy contributions, from bids for one-off infrastructure funding to the establishment of longer-term regional partnerships.
- Undertake quasi-academic functions such as conducting study skill sessions for access students, speaking at outreach events, or conducting overseas recruitment visits.
- Have the possibility of moving into an academic management role, for instance, a pro-vice-chancellor post with a portfolio such as quality, staffing, or institutional development.

In order to address this shortfall in understanding, the study used the concept of identity to theorise empirical work undertaken in the UK, Australia and the United States, and to explore the increasingly diverse forms of professional that are emerging in higher education. It builds on contemporary ideas about the fluidity of identity (Delanty, 2008; Taylor, 2008) to describe ways in which individuals are not only interpreting their given roles more actively, but are also moving laterally across functional and organisational boundaries to create new professional spaces, knowledges and relationships.

Definitions and Methodology

For the purposes of the project, 'professional staff' were defined as individuals having management roles but not an academic contract, and included, for instance:

- General managers in faculties, schools and departments, and functional areas such as student services.
- Specialist professionals with accredited qualifications such as those in finance and human resources offices.
- 'Niche' specialists who undertake functions specific to higher education, such as quality audit and research management.

The project was restricted to the professionals described above and did not, therefore, include academic managers such as deans and pro-vice-chancellors, or staff in teaching and learning, staff development, library and information services roles.

The study was conducted in two stages. Firstly, interviews were undertaken with twenty-four respondents in three different types of UK university (multi-faculty, green field and post-1992). The institutions were selected on the basis that they occupied different positions in the higher education system in terms of, for instance, mission, size, history, and teaching and research orientation. These interviews involved senior and middle managers on grades 3 to 6 of

the former academic-related staff pay scale in the pre-1992 sector, and on management or senior management grades in the post-1992 sector. They worked in a range of functional areas including finance, human resources, student support, external relations, planning and enterprise.

During the course of the first set of interviews it emerged that not only were individuals interpreting their roles more actively, but also that institutions were seeking out and employing individuals who could perform, on a dedicated basis, roles that crossed between professional and academic domains. A second set of interviews, therefore, was conducted with professional managers who were undertaking 'blended' or quasi-academic roles, such as managing student transitions or regional partnerships. A further five interviews with respondents from two of the three UK institutions were followed by interviews in Australia with ten respondents from a research-intensive, sandstone institution and a teaching-oriented, post-merger institution, and interviews in the United States with fifteen respondents from two public, state universities.

The study was, therefore, based on a total of fifty-four interviews. These are summarised in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Summary of Interviews of Professional Staff Undertaken for the Project

| Type of inst'n Country | Multi-faculty | Green field | Post-1992 | Sandstone | Post-merger | Public (1) | Public (2) | Totals |
|---------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|------------|------------|--------|
| UK | 8 | 11 | 10 | | | | | 29 |
| Australia | | | | 5 | 5 | | | 10 |
| US | | | | | | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| Totals | 8 | 11 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 54 |

Although consideration was given to whether the relationships between, for instance, academic managers (such as pro-vice-chancellors and deans) and professional staff should be explored more fully through additional interviews with academic managers, it was decided that, since this was the first study of its type, and there was no earlier empirical work on which to build, its scope would be restricted to the understandings that professional staff had of their own identities. A qualitative approach was adopted, therefore, using semi-structured interviews, to explore ways in which staff constructed their identities, and to understand the institutional space that they occupied, the types of knowledges and relationships they built, and the sources of their authority.

Redefining Professional Identities

From the analysis of the first set of interviews, it became apparent that respondents could be distinguished by their approach to the structures and boundaries that they encountered. These initial accounts were placed, therefore, into three broad groupings:

- Individuals who located themselves within the boundaries of a function or organisational location that they had either constructed for themselves, or which had been imposed upon them. These people were characterised by their concern for continuity and the maintenance of processes and standards, and by the performance of roles that were relatively prescribed. They were categorised as *bounded professionals*.
- Individuals who recognised, and actively used boundaries to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity, capitalising on their knowledge of territories on either side of the boundaries that they encountered. They were likely to display negotiating and political skills, and also to interact with the external environment. They were categorised as *cross-boundary professionals* and, as in the case of *bounded professionals*, boundaries were a defining mechanism for them.
- Individuals who displayed a disregard for boundaries, focusing on broadly based projects across the university such as widening participation, and on the development of their institutions for the future. These

people undertook work that might be described as institutional research and development, drawing on external experience and contacts, and were as likely to see their futures outside higher education as within the sector. They were categorised as *unbounded professionals*.

While *cross-boundary* and *unbounded professionals* were active in extending their roles beyond their given job descriptions, and were likely to operate on the borders of academic space, they nevertheless originated in mainstream professional roles, for instance in a student services or enterprise office. By contrast, a fourth category, of *blended professionals*, was increasingly being recruited to dedicated appointments that spanned both professional and academic domains. They were explored in the second set of interviews, and worked in areas such as regional partnership, learning support, outreach and offshore provision. They were likely to have mixed backgrounds and portfolios, as well as external experience in a contiguous environment such as regional development or the charitable sector. The four identity categories are summarised in Figure 2:

Figure 2
Categories of Professional Identity

| Categories of identity | Characteristics |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Bounded professionals</i> | Work within structural boundaries (eg function, job description) |
| <i>Cross-boundary professionals</i> | Actively use boundaries for strategic advantage and institutional capacity building |
| <i>Unbounded professionals</i> | Disregard boundaries to focus on broadly-based projects and institutional development |
| <i>Blended professionals</i> | Dedicated appointments spanning professional and academic domains |

Characteristics of 'Third Space'

As a result of the blurring boundary between professional and academic domains, a 'third' space has emerged, colonised primarily by *unbounded* and *blended professionals*, as described in Figure 3. On the left and right hand sides of the diagram respectively are professional and academic staff, performing their traditional roles, professional staff in generalist, specialist and 'niche' functions, and academic staff undertaking teaching, research and 'third leg' activity.

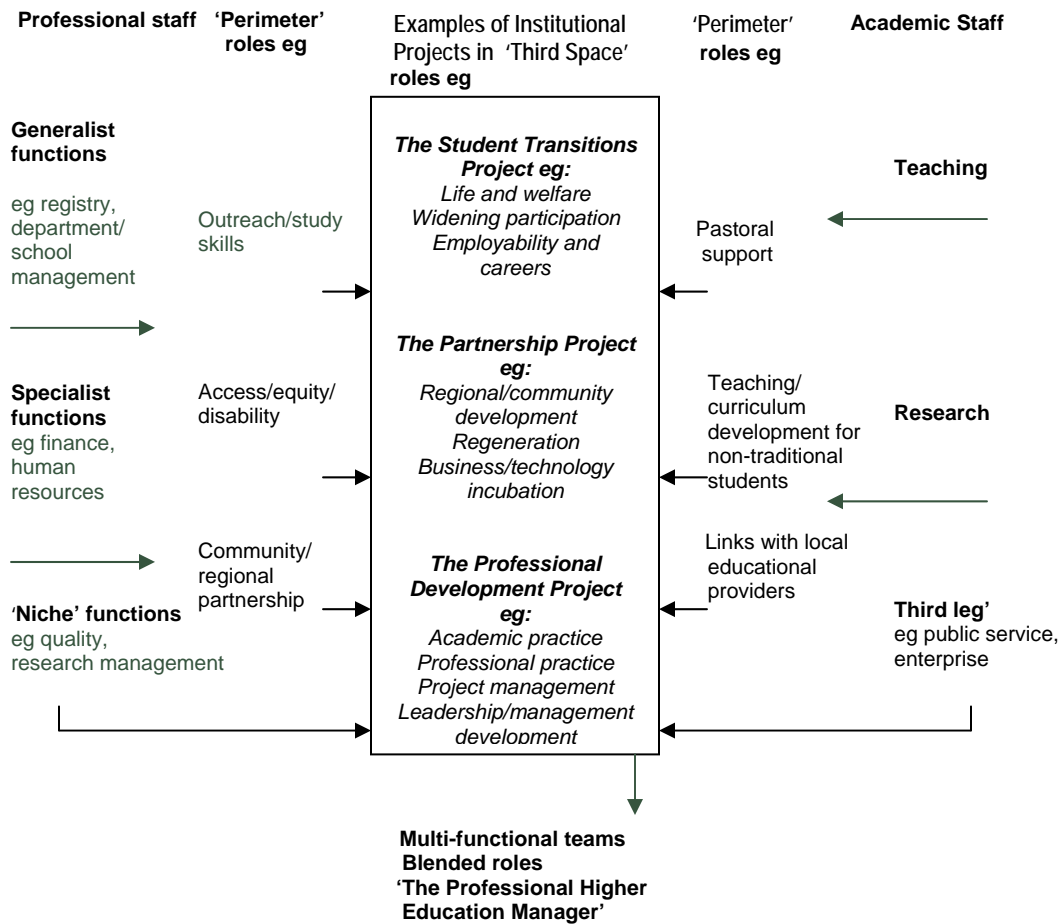
Alongside these roles, 'perimeter' roles have grown up around, for instance, in the case of professional staff, outreach and study skills, access and equity, community and regional partnership; and in the case of academic staff, pastoral support, curriculum development for non-traditional participants, and links with local educational providers. Over time, these 'perimeter' roles have increasingly converged in 'third space' around broadly based projects such as student transitions, community partnership and professional development.

'Third' space is characterised by teams that are both multi-functional and multi-professional, working on short-term projects such as bids for external funding and quality initiatives, as well as the longer-term projects noted above. In order for such joint working to occur, respondents in the study suggested that an understanding of academic space and mindsets was critical. This included, for instance, appreciating the disinterested nature of academic debate, and being able to hold one's own in this arena. Thus, an entrée to academic space was essential to 'growing' new forms of activity and integrating it within the institutional portfolio, for instance, collaborating with staff from further education providers and incorporating foundation degree students.

A number of respondents used organic imagery to describe this process, seeing the building of communicative relationships and networks as more significant than the observance of organisational boundaries, so much so that it was not unusual for new forms of activity to occur in spite of, rather than because of, formal structures. A key element in this process was developing an appropriate language, for instance about partnership activity, that 'spoke to' both academic and professional world-views. This required being able to take the part of academic colleagues, and using

language that resonated with them. Individuals, therefore, worked backwards and forwards across internal and external boundaries, translating and interpreting between different constituencies, and creating new institutional spaces, knowledges and relationships.

Figure 3
The Emergence of 'Third Space' between Professional and Academic Domains



Implications for Individuals

A sense of belonging to a particular project or team, as opposed to a specific organisational or professional location, has implications for individuals, both in terms of their credibility in their current roles and of their future career paths. One individual commented that "There's no kind of authority that you come with", and another that her relationship with her academic colleagues was characterised by an unspoken contract that: "If you solve a problem for us, we'll come back and work with you again". Thus, at the same time as legitimacies associated with administration and management are contested in the literature, there is evidence that staff are constructing new forms of authority via the institutional knowledges and relationships that they are able to create on a day-to-day, *ad personam* basis.

Credibility within an institution, therefore, increasingly depends on being able to build a profile in the local situation. In turn, this is likely to be facilitated by, for instance:

- Gaining the support of a key individual such as a pro-vice-chancellor.
- Obtaining academic credentials such as a Master's or doctoral degree.

- Finding 'safe space' in which to experiment with new forms of activity and relationships.
- Being comfortable with organisational "messiness" (de Rond, 2003), and projects that may be unfinished and unfinishable.
- Being able to use ambiguity to advantage, for instance, an individual might use the fact that they do not have a clear association with a specific organisational or professional location to build common ground with different constituencies.

A number of respondents had a sense of constructing a unique professional profile at the same time as making an innovative contribution to the development of their institution. As one of them remarked: "I really get off on creativity". It may be, therefore, that professional credibility will, in future, derive from, to quote another respondent, "What you are and not what you represent".

Other respondents spoke of marketing themselves, for instance to headhunters, as a 'higher education manager', suggesting that the contemporary professional is less concerned with a fixed body of knowledge than on maintaining an up-to-the-minute portfolio of experience, reflecting Bauman's contention that "You are only as good as your last successful project" (Bauman, 2005: 44). One respondent saw moving laterally as being as important for career progression as moving up a hierarchical career ladder:

"I've always tried to take the next step in another area, so that it moves you forward."

It may be, therefore, that not only will 'third space' experience be increasingly attractive to professional staff, but also that it may become a pre-requisite for career progression.

However, despite the fact that individuals working in 'third space' were characterised by strong lateral relationships and networks, they appeared to find hierarchical relationships, and line management responsibility for their own staff, more challenging. While there was emphasis on enabling their staff to operate as autonomous professionals, there was less confidence about occasions when staff might need to be given a steer in a particular direction. This suggests that it may be appropriate for individuals who spend time on project-oriented activity to consider how they might also gain mainstream line management experience, especially if they wish to achieve a post at top management level. Thus, different approaches may be required at different stages of a career.

While management and/or higher-level qualifications were seen as an increasingly significant element in career development, bespoke opportunities that were timely and appropriate, such as secondments and mentoring, tended to be favoured over formal programmes that did not lead to a qualification. While the majority of respondents preferred programmes that also included academic colleagues, it appeared that this could lead to difficulties if there were too much variation in levels of seniority and experience between the individual members of a group, for instance between middle level professional managers and senior academic managers.

Implications for Institutions

Although organisational restructuring is likely to remain a feature of institutional life, the study suggests that this might be usefully informed by consideration of the nature of boundaries, and the way that individuals operate around them, particularly when boundaries are being reconfigured or functions relocated. Furthermore, some institutions are more boundary-driven than others. At one institution, where there was a clear demarcation between professional and academic domains, and between institutional management at the centre and local management in academic departments, all but one of the respondents were categorised as *bounded professionals*, and a number of them expressed frustration that they were unable to move beyond their functional or organisational 'silos'.

It may also be significant that at the two institutions with more permeable boundaries, and the greatest movement of professional staff around them, senior managers were seeking to implement directional change in the form of local

partnership and outreach activity. The fact that *bounded professionals* represented a smaller number of the staff interviewed at these institutions suggests that senior managers may have appointed, consciously or unconsciously, less *bounded* forms of professional, who were likely to facilitate new forms of activity. It also suggests that there was recognition that such professionals, having been recruited, would be likely to be frustrated if they were then overly restricted by boundary considerations.

Thus, while *bounded* approaches to institutional activity will continue to be required to maintain processes and systems, to safeguard academic and regulatory standards, and to ensure organisational continuity, it may also be helpful for institutions to consider how such approaches might be balanced with greater flexibility around boundaries, in order that working practices do not become overly restrictive. Institutions may wish, therefore, in reviewing recruitment policies and the construction of job descriptions, to consider the balance of professional staff that is appropriate for their particular mission and direction.

Discussion about the shape of the professional workforce might include, for instance, whether more project-oriented individuals might assist in stimulating new thinking and ways of working, bearing in mind that too many such people could be a liability if, for instance, they did not attach sufficient priority to audit requirements or time deadlines. There are also issues about when and how 'third space' activity might be mainstreamed, in order to make way for new projects that come along.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that movement by professional staff between institutions, and in and out of the sector, has been fostered by institutions seeking to recruit people with experience from other contiguous sectors, such as regional development or fundraising, and by individuals adopting more project-oriented, portfolio approaches to their careers. Such developments have led, on the one hand, to the view that professional staff might be seen as 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).

On the other hand, the study suggests that it may be helpful for institutions to modify a belief that such mobility represents 'disloyalty', in that such individuals may make a more valuable contribution to an institution in the period that they are there than longer-serving staff. There are, therefore, issues about the value accorded to professional staff who may bring expertise from elsewhere, but then move on when they have completed a specific project.

An International Dimension

The international interviews were intended to explore whether there were any lessons from overseas for UK institutions, particularly in relation to those categories of staff categorised as *unbounded* or *blended*. In Australia, there appeared to be stronger definition of the positioning of professional staff as 'managers', with a greater polarisation of 'management' and 'academic' identities, which could create 'us' and 'them' attitudes. This was in contrast to the UK, where a significant proportion of respondents said that they were willing to be known as 'administrators' if this was more acceptable to academic colleagues. Furthermore, in Australia there appeared to be a sense of marginalisation among individuals who had a project-oriented portfolio, although the fact that many professional staff in Australia were employed on fixed term contracts, albeit renewable, may have contributed to this. Possibly as a result of these factors, there was less evidence of the development of 'third space' in either of the institutions visited.

Nevertheless, it was striking that a much higher proportion of respondents in Australia had higher degrees. 80% had Master's degrees and 60% had doctorates, in contrast to the UK where the comparable percentages were 27% and 8%. Likewise, in the US, where entrants to university administration would be expected to have completed a Master's programme in, for instance, student affairs, 93% of respondents had Master's degrees and 60% had doctorates. These figures reflected a well-established higher education knowledge base for professional staff in the US, which might be seen in terms of an academic, or at least a professional, discipline in its own right. Individuals were more

likely than in the UK to be involved in contributing to professional networks, publications, journals and conferences. Furthermore, the concept of 'academic administration' had different connotations than in the UK, in that the most senior institutional managers, including presidents, were referred to as 'academic administrators'.

Possibly for the reasons outlined above, a majority of respondents in the US referred to having the respect and trust of academic colleagues on the basis of their professional knowledge, and/or of their institutional position. Thus, in the US, professional staff appeared to have a both a stronger profile and greater autonomy than in the UK or Australia. People involved in more project-oriented, developmental activity tended to be mainstreamed in, for instance, offices of institutional research or student life. It appeared, however, to be a more political environment, and professional staff were expected to be able to negotiate their position, and that of their function or project, within this.

Conclusion

Although this was a relatively small-scale study, it may be suggestive of trends in professional staff identities, of which the implications have not been fully recognised. Understandings emerging from it may, therefore, help to provide a fuller picture of how professional identities are likely to develop in future. Not only are individuals interpreting their given roles more actively, but they are also moving laterally across boundaries, creating new institutional spaces, knowledges, and relationships, particularly in a 'third space' between professional and academic domains. Rather than drawing their authority solely from established roles and structures, they increasingly build their credibility on an *ad personam* basis, via the relationships they develop with colleagues inside and outside the university. However, 'third space' activity, which assists institutions both to build capacity and to develop for the future, may reduce opportunities for professional staff to obtain mainstream 'management' experience.

As professional staff work across and beyond boundaries, they are re-defining the nature of their work, and it may be that those institutions that are able to give recognition to more extended ways of working will be the most likely to maximise the contribution of their staff, and to achieve an effective accommodation with their current and future environments. It may also be that the most mature institutions will be those that are able to incorporate, and facilitate, a balance of professional staff that is appropriate for their shape and direction of travel, taking a view of where and how these might be clustered.

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