

Leadership careers in professional services

A provocation for discussion and debate

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Introduction

Within the Higher Education sector, we all *know*, or think we know, that professional services staff play a critical role in the strategic and operational success of a university, contributing to the effectiveness and sustainability of the institution and enhancing the student experience. Their diverse skill sets and expertise are integral to the multifaceted and complex nature of our institutions. In an Australian study for the University Development and Administration (UDAA) series (2018), authors Bossu and Brown acknowledge that: 'Professional and support staff are one of the universities' most valuable assets, as they hold much of the corporate knowledge required to ensure that universities operate efficiently and effectively.'ⁱ

Yet, something surprising happens when we come to look for the evidence to prove our case. We find a limited body of knowledge, as Bossu and Brown both concede: 'It's surprising that their work, impact, careers, and aspirations remain largely unexplored.'ⁱⁱ

King's College London researchers, Alison Wolf and Andrew Jenkins, confirm meanwhile in their 2021 paper entitled *Managers and academics in a centralising sector*, that a literature trawl on professional services yields little. They highlight the absence of in-depth analysis within what constitutes a rich potentially research field of organisational structure, design and people: 'It is a curious fact that in both the academic and the policy discussion of universities, half of their staff are almost entirely ignored. [...] extremely little is written about them. This is true for the academic literature, for the policy writing that most directly informs government thinking and of education journalism.'ⁱⁱⁱ Given that professional services staff comprise nearly half of an intensely scrutinised whole it is singular that they should remain somewhat invisible: 'two parallel workforces of very much the same size, and this is a fundamental structural feature of the sector.'^{iv} The rigid binary division Wolf and Jenkins reference is a rarity of organisational design and may even be unique to the university sector.^v

Just as there is little literature on many aspects of professional services, so too on the leadership careers of their staff. This provocation will therefore draw largely on the Advance HE 2023/24 Leadership survey (specifically data/information from professional services staff on how they view their own leadership opportunities and challenges); HESA data; and findings from a survey conducted by AHEP (formerly the AUA). This will permit us to bring the voice of professional services staff to the fore and enable us to ask the most immediate and urgent questions identified within the profession by those who seek to lead it.

We hope that this current paper will provoke reflection and deliberation in the sector. It is by its nature a snapshot of such a complex entity as HE professional services. As you will see in Section E – *Next steps*, we will be inviting you to expand and deepen the debate.

Section A – The evolving size and shape of professional services

In order to understand professional services and its leadership cadre, let us first consider size and shape. Here we find an inconclusive picture from our primary data source, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). We might be advised to read the statistics with caution as HESA no longer requires the return of professional staff data in England and Wales. It is possible therefore that at least part of the apparent change in numbers cited in this paper is effectively due to fewer HESA data returns.

A review of HESA data over the last two decades would appear to show us that the absolute number of professional services' staff peaked in the academic year 2018/2019 at 217,580 or 50.7% of all staff. Since then, it seems to have fallen by over 25,000 heads and now stands at 192,210 or 45.1% of the HE workforce.^{vi}

A key characteristic of professional services is undoubtedly its eclectic nature. It is hard to think of it as a single workforce, encapsulating as it does 55 Heads of Institution down to nearly 20,000 staff in so-called 'elementary occupations' (Advance HE [Equality in higher education: statistical reports 2023](#)). Some areas of professional services seem to have expanded whilst others have contracted.

Areas where staff numbers appear to have fallen include 'Managers, directors and senior officials' (11,680 to 9,665), 'Associate professional and technical' (48,625 to 43,985) and 'Administrative and secretarial' (70,630 to 59,435).

Celia Whitchurch in her 2023 article authored for HEPI entitled: The changing profile and work experiences of higher education staff in the 21st century suggests that there has been a downward trend in professional services posts overall brought about by ongoing digitisation, the outsourcing of manual and technical roles together with the re-badging of non-research roles to take them out of the UK Research Excellence Framework.^{vii}

While Whitchurch points to a fall in professional service numbers overall, she identifies an increase within those occupations focusing on all aspects of the student experience including student study skills and support. We cannot know this for certain, as detailed data and analysis is unavailable.

While we might dispute the absolute veracity of the data, what is clear is that roles within professional services are morphing and changing.

Academic and professional services roles are coming together more frequently in the post-Covid era into what is described by Whitchurch as a 'third space'^{viii}. Bossus and Brown also refer to these emergent roles and reference them as 'para-academic'.^{ix} Hybrid roles combine professional services and academic job attributes and tasks to create greater collaborative working between the two professional strands. Indeed, some 20% of the 2023 Advance HE Leadership survey participants declared their jobs to involve characteristics of both academic and professional services roles.^x 'Third space' job roles are particularly prevalent in academic practice and learning support, educational technologies, and public

engagement, among others, where skills are seen to overlap and complement one another. However, with professional support staff data being non-mandatory for institutions to return to HESA, it is impossible to track this transformation with accuracy. Whitchurch concludes: 'The HESA data suggest a fraying at the edges of the concept of a unified academic or professional cadre, with a common experience of linear careers and assumptions about achieving certain career goals within certain timescales.'^{xi}

From our Advance HE Leadership survey, we know that departmental restructures within professional services have not been uncommon in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the recent past. Large departments, such as marketing and IT, some with staff in excess of 150 heads, have been reshaped and realigned to fit new models of practice. It seems legitimate to ask whether these trends have been successful in creating a refreshed professional services cadre better able to meet the demands of the HE environment.

Questions to emerge include:

What is the experience of your institution in professional services staffing numbers? Are they rising, falling or remaining stable? How are changes in staffing numbers, such as they exist, affecting performance? Are professional services now optimised for efficiency and effectiveness? Are there other issues which are critical to the organisational structure and design of HE professional services not referenced here?

Let us look to the most recent survey data that we hold from both the 2023 Advance HE Leadership Survey and the AUA Future HE Professionals Survey (published 2020).

Section B – What do professional services leaders say...

About pressing priorities for leadership within their institution?

In the Advance HE Leadership Survey, when asked, 'what areas of practice in HE should be prioritised for leadership?'^{xii}, a picture emerges of a professional services workforce undergoing considerable change and challenge. The people agenda rises firmly to the fore in the free form comments section of the survey with aspirations to build a positive, collaborative culture.

We find professional services leaders who are seeking both to lead and be led more inclusively and with greater 'fairness' (a word cited frequently in the qualitative data), through broader consultation and with much greater attention paid to staff wellbeing and progression. Professional services' leaders and those with hybrid roles see greater opportunities to influence strategy development as well as strategy delivery, bringing purpose and vision to all staff by creating clear and compelling engagement narratives. They want to develop their teams and the individuals therein and address performance issues through more systematic routes. They also recognise their invaluable role in building institutional sustainability – financial, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), environmental

and other. And they express a commitment to the social purpose and mission of their HEI in very similar numbers to academic colleagues.

2023 AHE Leadership Survey – Analysis of Qualitative Statements by Professional Services Leaders to Questions 13, 21 & 25

13. What area(s) of practice in HE leadership do you think should be the priority for development at your institution? Please describe 2 or 3 areas that you think should be a priority for development in detail.	21. What areas of knowledge and current awareness development should be prioritised for leaders at your institution? Please describe 2 or 3 areas that you think should be a priority for leaders in detail.	25. What value(s) of HE leadership do you think should be the focus of development at your institution?
+ Inclusivity/fairness	+ Leading and enabling change	+ Inclusivity/fairness
+ Leadership of strategic change	+ Staff wellbeing	+ Authenticity
+ Enhancing team and individual performance	+ Communication	+ Social purpose
+ Sustainability	+ Inclusivity/fairness	+ Community/collegiality
+ Demonstrating value and measuring impact	+ Staff engagement	+ Transparency/openness

Indeed, one conclusion of the Advance HE survey is that there is a ‘clear set of common and consistent leadership development priorities’ and an ‘opportunity - and necessity – to expand provision for leadership development across a broad spectrum of leadership roles’.^{xiii} Is this development now starting to take place more systematically?

About their career and development opportunities?

Many professional services respondents to the Advance HE Leadership Survey see chances to step up from informal leadership roles to take on more institutional and people responsibilities. These informal leaders will offer their services without formal promotion in order to build their leadership attributes and learn new skills – for a time.^{xiv} There is, however, also a desire and an expectation of clearer career development opportunities.

Here, we turn to the AUA Future HE Professionals Survey (2,000 respondents) which concluded among other things that: ‘survey responses reveal some concern around institutional commitment to (and investment in) professional development for professional services staff, including a perceived absence of defined professional career structures/pathways.’^{xv} Despite this, the survey goes on to state that 77% of respondents had been both encouraged and developed by their manager/institution as an individual. However, the baseline assumption is that individuals and not the HEI must take the lead responsibility for development and that formal career structures/pathways are essentially not required. Indeed, among AUA stakeholder focus groups convened to socialise and comment on the survey results, there was general agreement that ‘comparisons to the HE academic promotion pathway are *unhelpful* and *invalid*.’^{xvi} [our emphasis]

This latter quotation is a challenging one, revealing what seems to be two quite separate approaches to career development. One where career pathways are considered highly desirable and necessary, one where such interventions are deemed ‘invalid’. Is this the real-time paradigm for many leaders within professional services? If so, one wonders whether it is still apposite given the desire, indeed the necessity expressed by professional services leaders in the Advance HE Leadership survey to support skills development more systematically and rigorously within the workforce – and importantly not just for individuals but for teams? Here is how one professional services leader put it: ‘Professional Services development is a huge gap.’ And another: ‘We need staff development as a rigorous and integral component of succession planning to build organisational capacity’.^{xvii}

Does it help or hinder talent development and succession planning efforts to emphasise the predominant responsibilities of the individual over the role of the institution?

Here institutional opportunity may appear to be traded off against personal responsibility. Little wonder then that talent management and succession planning are described by professionals who work in the sector as immature and patchy^{xviii} within professional services.

And where do ‘third space’ leaders with mixed academic and professional services responsibilities fit within this paradigm? Is it still valid at a time when professional services are contributing more than ever to the bottom line of HEIs through their student-centred agendas? As Whitchurch indicates: ‘while [professional services have] moved to more value add – grow and compete for students – it doesn’t mean that leadership and careers have been taken seriously’.^{xix}

Following publication of the AUA Future HE Professionals survey and perhaps in part due to the intelligence gathered through that process, a decision was taken to re-launch and rebrand the professional body in the latter half of 2023. The Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) has now emerged which has a stated mission to expand the professional services careers it exists to develop and enhance. It has moved away from the notion of covering only university administrators to a much broader range of professions within the HE sector including student experience and teaching and learning.^{xx} This is undoubtedly a positive development for the sector and will increase the number of roles benefitting from professional body support. AHEP advocates a collaborative approach to define and enhance professional services standards overall.

Stand-alone routes have also emerged to support distinct professional groups such as technicians. The Technician Commitment established in 2017 is a UK-wide initiative to support career development and build a positive culture in the technician community within HE. It aims to ensure ‘visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technical staff’. It has proven to be highly successful and is led by an influential steering group of sector bodies with 150 universities signing up to the pledge. From this commitment, new and well-defined career paths have been developed for many technicians.

Questions that emerge include:

- + Is it helpful to envisage the development of professional services' leaders as separate and different to academic leaders?
- + Does the Technician Commitment demonstrate that viable career development routes can be created successfully where there is a strong collective will?
- + Or can career pathways only emerge when a burning platform is identified?

Must an identifiable and high-profile problem exist first (such as poor research culture in the case of Technicians) or could more proactive responses be achieved? ^{xxi}

Section C – What academic leaders say about professional services support...

Many academics are vocal in their support for their professional services colleagues and recognise and appreciate their value-add. Many too, though, are the academic colleagues who fear that the burden of administration is shifting back to academic departments without the support resource previously in place.

This was certainly a topic raised through our Academic Leadership research in 2023. The administrative burden appeared to be felt most acutely at academic departmental level and with considerable pressure in particular on the pivotal role of Head of Department (HoD) or Head of School.^{xxii} Having to manage the administration of a department through slimmed down and centralised services can feel like hard work. This finding is reinforced by the work of Budjanovcanin and Denney who identify the lack of support experienced by many HoDs as one of the reasons it is becoming harder to recruit to, retain and develop this critical role.^{xxiii}

When we examine HESA data, we see a year-on-year reduction in administrative support staff *based within* academic departments between 2005 and 2019. 'Assuming this is an accurate picture', the number of secretaries typists and receptionists has declined by more than 50% and has fallen from 10% of non-academic staff to 4%. This represents a sharp reduction in direct secretarial and administrative support for academics,' affirm Wolf and Jenkins.^{xxiv}

Well yes, one may say, but hasn't the very nature of administrative support changed? There is now more online support through HR and finance modules, for example, rolled out across many universities to simplify and digitise services. Plus, greater efficiency and consistency has been created by centralising admissions processes, for example, eliminating a myriad of local workarounds. It would be appropriate to wonder whether continued unhappiness among academics is in fact the noise created by the substantial change process itself. If so, we can assume that this will gradually abate and disappear altogether. And yet dissatisfaction persists and anecdotally many feel that it is increasing. Online systems do after all still need human intervention, and engaging central services requires time and

effort. Change comes at a price and it is fair to ask whether that price is delivering commensurate benefits?

- + Would now be a moment to ask whether the move to centralise and simplify support is actually delivering optimal results for staff and students?
- + Are the right people with the right skills now doing the work? If not, then significant stress and anxiety may inadvertently be pushed into the system.
- + What further adjustments are required? Where, with whom and how could those conversations take place most effectively?

Section D – Where to next for professional services?

There are some who suggest that professional services require root and branch review. Wolf and Jenkins are undoubtedly among those who consider this to be pressing and time critical: 'Internal organisation and governance of our universities,' they state, 'requires some quite urgent attention.'^{xxv} Professional services must, in their view 'step from the shadows' and offer full disclosure about their vision, purpose, cost and return on investment.

Many from within professional services might argue, that their role has always been to create and maintain an enabling environment, ensuring that the spotlight fell where it was needed on the work of the academics, their teaching, learning, entrepreneurship and research. Professional services do not need to take centre stage but to support and optimise the performance of their colleagues.

Is there a position between these poles, which would have professional services step forward with full and confident transparency to embrace their value-add – as equals, partners and collaborators? Unafraid to have their organisational structure scrutinised, take full accountability for both their costs to the institution and their return on investment – open to being questioned and ready to promote creativity and improvement for all?

With that, one suspects, might come a new attitude to developing the professional services workforce and its leadership cadre, in particular. One in which talent management and succession planning would lie at the heart of organisational development with all that involves to systematically grow and develop an optimised professional services workforce sitting at the heart rather than waiting in the wings of our HEIs.

Section E – Next steps

This provocation shares reflections and questions as a stimulus for thinking within the sector. We anticipate that further opportunities and areas of concern will be identified by you as we put the spotlight on professional services leadership and management careers. We acknowledge that our thoughts may only represent a relatively narrow subset of the issues on your mind.

That is why we want to hear from you, the professionals in the field.

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[In their 2018 contribution to a deeper understanding of Professional Services, Dr Carina Bossu and Professor Natalie Brown both from the University of Tasmania, curated 18 contributions to exploring key issues facing professional services staff as reported through their own experiences.](#)
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wolf, A. and Jenkins, A., (2021) *Managers and academics in a centralising sector – The new staffing patterns of UK higher education*, p. 18.
- ^{iv} Ibid, p. 22.
- ^v Ibid, p. 19. Wolf and Jenkins write: ‘Although there has been relatively little formal research into the non-academic half of the university workforce, such data and literature as exist paints a fairly consistent international picture.’
- ^{vi} HESA Records (2021/22). Equality in HE Statistical Report 2023 – Staff data tables_1699956047, sheet 0.2
- ^{vii} Whitchurch, C., (2023). *The changing profile and work experiences of higher education staff in the 21st century*. HEPI 20th Online Anniversary Collection.
- ^{viii} Ibid. Whitchurch’s list of ‘third space roles’ is long and helps us appreciate just how important this field has become for *professional services*. It includes: *educational development, including academic practice and learning support; study skills and academic writing; student employability and skills development; educational technology and the development of the digital environment; support for underserved students and communities, including diversity and inclusion; the management of student success; promotion of research enterprise, impact, knowledge exchange and transfer; data management, analytics, strategic planning and institutional research; and public engagement, alumni relations, charitable and humanitarian work.*
- ^{ix} Bossu, C. and Brown, N.,(2018).
- ^x Neves, J. and Parkin, D. (2023) Leadership Survey for Higher Education, Advance HE, p.13.
- ^{xi} Whitchurch, C. (2023).
- ^{xii} Analysis of the qualitative comments in Sections 3.4, 4.3 and 5.2 of the Leadership Survey for Higher Education by professional services and ‘third space’ survey respondents.
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- ^{xiv} Ibid, pp 22 -23.
- ^{xv} West, A., (2019-2020). Future HE Professionals – What our survey revealed.
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- ^{xx} The AHEP list includes: student experience, teaching and learning, recruitment and admissions, faculty/college, school and department, data professionals, quality and standards, change and transformation. <https://ahep.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/AHEP-FAQs.pdf>

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^{xxiv}Wolf, A. and Jenkins, A., (2021), p. 26.

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ⁱ Bossu, C. and Brown, N.,(2018) Professional and Support Staff in Higher Education.

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ⁱⁱ Ibid.

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^{iv} Ibid, p. 22.

^vIbid, p. 19. Wolf and Jenkins write: ‘Although there has been relatively little formal research into the non-academic half of the university workforce, such data and literature as exist paints a fairly consistent international picture.’

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^{ix} Bossu, C. and Brown, N.,(2018).

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^{xv} West, A., (2019-2020). Future HE Professionals – What our survey revealed.

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