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Do professional managers have a profession? The specialist/generic distinction amongst non-academic higher education professionals

An emerging literature is beginning to create a theoretical framework for analysing the role of professional managers – that is, those without an ongoing academic background – in the context of UK higher education (Conway, 2000; Lauwerys, 2002; Whitchurch, 2006; Whitchurch, 2007; Barnett and Di Napoli, 2008). Here I argue, drawing on my own experience in a range of higher education institutions, that this literature misses a crucial distinction amongst non-academic professional managers, namely that between generic HE professionals, and specialists from professions which exist outside the world of higher education (for example, human resources professionals, lawyers, marketing professionals). Building on this distinction to analyse the professional identities of non-academic higher education professionals, I recommend ways in which institutions can reduce the professional-academic divide in university management.

‘Professional Managers’ – who are we talking about?

In Celia Whitchurch’s definition, ‘the term “professional managers” is used to capture those people performing generalist roles, such as student services or departmental management, and also those in specialist roles, such as finance and human resources’ (Whitchurch, 2006: 6). However, most of her analysis focuses on the generalist rather than specialist professionals, and does not distinguish between these two groups in terms of professional identity. Whitchurch’s emphasis is also the emphasis to be found in most of the literature related to this topic (see, for example, Lauwerys, 2002, and Conway, 2000).

Table One lists the management roles filled by non-academic professionals in HEIs and their contribution to the management of teaching and research. The broadest category of non-academic professional managers remains the generic group of ‘higher education managers and administrators’. The table uses the term ‘professional managers’ in line with Celia Whitchurch’s definition, above, which covers both generalist and specialist roles (Whitchurch, 2006: 6). Whitchurch, for reasons which are not entirely clear, omits ‘library and information science professionals’ from her categorisation of professional managers (Whitchurch, 2008: 70). They are included here as they are clearly identifiable professional groups working in HEIs who contribute to teaching and research.

Clearly, not all HEIs employ the full list of professionals set out in Table One. As a general rule, the smaller the institution, the less likely it is to have all professional services either in-house or carried out by trained professionals. So, for example, marketing may be overseen by generic HE managers and administrators with no marketing training or qualification. Nonetheless, Table One provides a comprehensive overview of the vast contribution made by non-academic professionals to the management of teaching and research in UK HEIs.

Table One. Non-academic professional managers in HEIs and their contribution to the management of teaching and research

'Professional managers' ¹	Professional body ²	Contributions to the management of teaching and research
Accountants	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy Institute of Chartered Accountants in England & Wales (and similar for Scotland and Northern Ireland) (all chartered)	Managing staff payroll, student fees. Research grant applications and administration. Financial health of the institution. Business spin-offs.
Architects	Royal Institute of British Architects (chartered)	Management and design of building projects for the creation of teaching and research space.
Disability equality professionals	Disability Equality Professionals Association	Support for disabled students and staff.
Higher education managers and administrators	Association of University Administrators	Institutional strategy, planning, and policy advice. Quality assurance. Examination and assessment administration. Servicing Committees, Boards, Governing Bodies. Research Assessment Exercise. Research grant applications and administration. External relations (publicity, public relations, recruitment). Business relations. Alumni relations. International office (recruitment of and support for international students – including visa support). Student enrollment and admission processes. Academic regulations. Conference organisation. Departmental administration. Pastoral support of students.
Human resources professionals	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (chartered)	Staff recruitment. Managing staff performance. Staff support – counselling, dignity at work. Employment policies, for example, leave, working at home Implementation of employment laws.

Table One continued.

'Professional managers'	Professional body	Contributions to the management of teaching and research
IT professionals	British Computer Society (chartered)	E-learning. Computer support and training for staff and students
Lawyers	The Law Society	Staff grievances. Student grievances Equality and disability issues. Codes of Practice. Data protection. Contracts and agreements, for example, research and business-related activities, licensing, collaborative agreements, secondments.
Librarians and information professionals	Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (chartered)	Library and information provision. Archival maintenance.
Marketing professionals	Chartered Institute of Marketing (chartered)	Student recruitment. Analysis of market for new and existing courses.
Public relations professionals	Chartered Institute of Public Relations (chartered)	Developing institutional reputation and mutual understanding between the institution and its public.
Staff development professionals	Staff and Educational Development Association	Staff development (for example, to improve teaching, research bid writing)

¹ The term 'professional managers' should not be taken to imply that all members of the listed professional groups in HEIs have a management role, rather that within each of these groups there are those with a management role which contributes in some way to the management of teaching and research.

² All of the professional groups in Table One have their own professional associations listed. This is to confirm the status of the profession rather than to assert that all those working in HEIs are members of the relevant professional association

Professional identities and relations with academic colleagues

Analysts such as Rosemary Deem and Gary Rhoades argue that the management of HEIs has become a partnership between academic and non-academic managers, where the distinction between the two is decreasingly significant, particularly at senior levels. Whilst broadly supporting that view, I argue that in terms of professional identities, the distinction between generic higher education administrator-managers and other professionals working in HEIs is a key distinction, but one which is not found in the emerging literature on non-academic professionals in higher education. Within this analysis, identities are categorised

as *essential* and *situational*, and in the latter context the divide between departmental level and institutional level is an important distinguishing feature.

Rosemary Deem led a two year project (1998-2000), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, on the effect of 'new managerialism' in UK universities, which included interviews with 29 senior administrators (Deem, 2005: 9). The work of Deem and her colleagues led to the conclusion that an identifiable community of practice exists at senior levels in UK universities.

In our interview data, those manager-academics who most strongly held notions of universities as communities with some common interests transcending small academic and other enclaves were those in senior management, typically vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors but also professional administrators. (Deem and Johnson, 2000: 68)

The conclusion is that at senior levels there is a clear commonality of purpose and community of practice.

At lower managerial levels, however, the issue of the identities of 'professional managers' appears less clear-cut than at the senior level. Little research has been published about this question, particularly when compared to the amount of research on the question of academic identities and their multiple nature (see, for example, Becher, 1989; Henkel, 2000). The approach taken here then draws on such research into academic identities and applies similar analytical frameworks to professional managers. It also draws evidence from personal experience in relation to professional specialists at lower levels in institutions where I have worked (Birkbeck College, Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln, the University of Birmingham, and the University of Warwick).

Henkel's research on academic identities is not unique in noting that their professional identities come through teaching, research, and – more rarely – management (Henkel, 2000). These are *essential* identities, to do with the individual academic and her personal motivations and achievements. Another layer of professional identity is *situational* identity, and has to do with the location of professional commitment within the institutional structure. With a dominant research identity, academic commitment is primarily to knowledge within the individual's own disciplinary setting, rather than to the institution that employs the individual. Residual identity is then more likely to be not at institutional but at departmental level, where others likewise labour within the same discipline and where the presence of students fits the teaching identity of the academic. Clearly though, the more an academic is engaged with institutional-level matters (that is, the more senior she is) then the more that identity will be with the institution itself.

Essential identity of professional managers

If we apply these two types of identity – the essential and the institutional – to professional managers then the importance of distinguishing between generic HE administrator-managers and more specialist professionals becomes central. In my own interaction with such specialists as human resource professionals, accountants, and architects within HEIs, I have noted that such people often have – and always have recourse to – a professional identity which is *external* to the higher education sector. In other words, many of them practised their professions elsewhere, in the private or public sectors, before taking a job in higher education. Furthermore, they are often not wedded to staying in an HEI for the rest of their careers, since their next job could easily be outside of higher education without this entailing a change of profession. Such an option is not so readily available to the generic HE administrator-manager, nor indeed to the academic.

We can propose then that just as the essential professional identity of academics often lies with their disciplines, so the essential identity of non-academic specialists lies with their specialisms.

They are professional specialists who at present happen to work in higher education. Indeed, to take a further step in this analysis drawing on my own experience of such specialists, I have known an architect, a human resources professional, and a marketing professional who have all expressed the concern to me that should they remain too long in higher education, their professional identities would shift from their profession *per se* to being tied into the higher education sector. In other words, they will no longer be able to identify themselves purely by their professional specialism, but will be identified as professional specialists within the HE sector. This shift in identity is perceived as linked to length of service. To quote one specialist professional in an HEI who spoke to me about this recently, ‘if I stay here more than 5 years, I’ll never get another job back in the private sector’. He moved on.

The conclusion that professional identities linked to particular specialisms begin to fade as length of service in higher education increases is backed up by the more rigorous research led by Rosemary Deem and noted above.

At very senior levels (PVCs and above) manager-academics may have more in common with senior professional administrators such as finance directors or human resources directors than they do with other academics. (Deem and Johnson, 2000: 67)

Seniority is often related to length of service. Clearly both academic and non-academic managers become increasingly identified as higher education managers, although both will also retain some of their earlier identity – be it the academic in their research field, or the non-academic in their professional specialism. However, the generic higher education administrator-manager is less likely to have such a distinct professional hinterland separate from the business of HE administration.

Situational identity of professional managers

Having considered the essential identity of professional managers, let us turn to their situational identity. Again, applying an analytical framework similar to that used in relation to academic identities facilitates a consideration of situational identity as applied to non-academic professional managers. The key factor which we noted in relation to academics' situational identity is that an essential identity which is inclined to an individual's discipline in terms of research and teaching contributes to a situational identity which is more inclined to be at the departmental as opposed to the institutional level.

Taking the key variants of an individual's situational identity to be departmental versus institutional, let us apply this to non-academic professionals. Considering the list of professional managers set out in Table One, one point is immediately apparent in relation to our analytical framework; namely, few professional managers are located in academic departments. Departments will probably have a senior administrator or two who is part of the generic HE administrator-manager professional group. Beyond that, most professional managers will be located at a distance from departments, often at the institutional level, sometimes at the level of School or Faculty. This is usually the case even in institutions where particular professional-managers are given special responsibility for particular departments, for example, where an HR professional is tasked to work with certain designated departments.

As always in higher education, it is not possible to characterise HEIs as if they were all the same. In institutions where financial devolution goes down to departmental level, the number of professional managers in departments will be higher (Whitchurch, 2008: 76). Similarly, where institutions or departments have a particular focus on business engagement or spin-off companies, or other forms of external interaction, again more professional managers will be required at the departmental level. Ditto in multi-campus institutions.

Nonetheless, despite these variations, the generalisation holds true that professional managers' situational identity is far more likely to be at the institutional level than at the departmental level, as opposed to academics' situational identity, which is at the departmental far more than the institutional level.

Figures One and Two emphasise in diagrammatic form the different situational identities of academics and professional managers respectively in HEIs. Figure One shows that the broad base of academics' situational identity is at the departmental level, with only a few academics (mostly at senior level) having their primary professional identity at institutional level. As ever, the argument here is to some extent dependent on the nature of the institution in question. It is the case that in small HEIs, particularly specialist or mono-technical colleges, academics are more likely to have an institutional identity than in larger institutions, where a departmental identity is more likely to predominate for the reasons outlined above (commitment to discipline and to teaching). This is because disciplinary differences between departments are far less pronounced in small and specialist institutions, and all academics there are relatively closer to the institutional level of management than in larger HEIs.

Figure Two shows that professional managers' situational identity is, in contrast to that of academics, most widely held at institutional level, with relatively few having their primary professional identity at departmental level.

Demonstrating situational identity in diagrammatic form has the advantage of emphasising the starkness of the contrast between the situational identity of these two groups; a contrast which is instructive as we turn to recommendations regarding professional managers' relations with academic colleagues.

Figure One.
Situational identity
of academics.

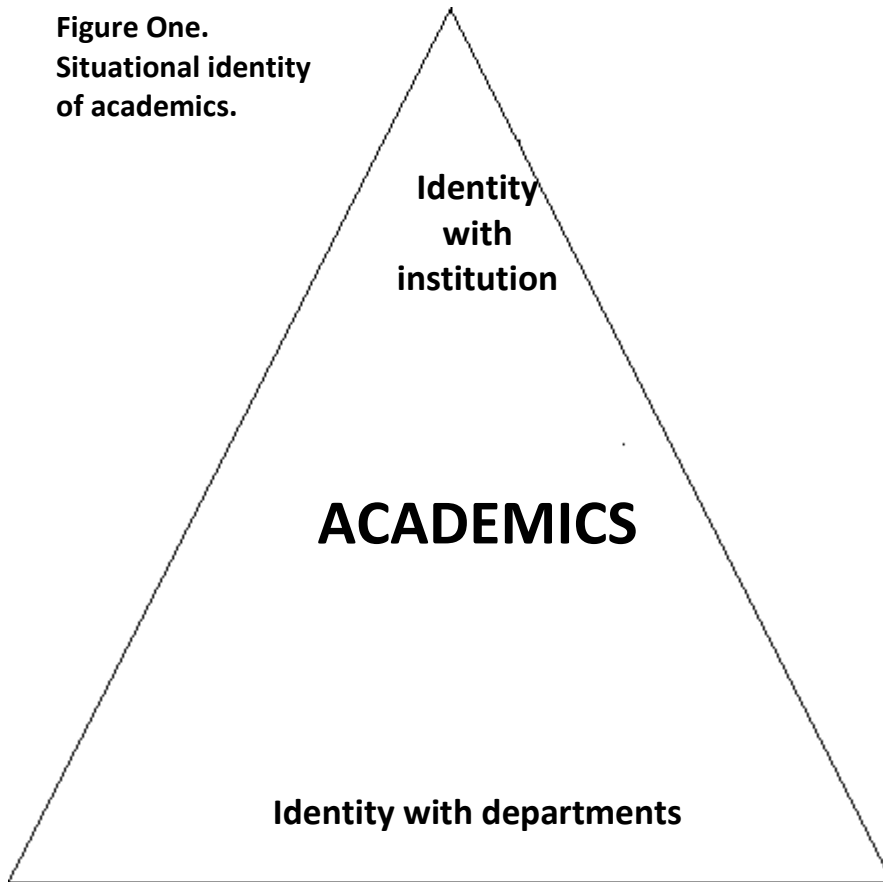
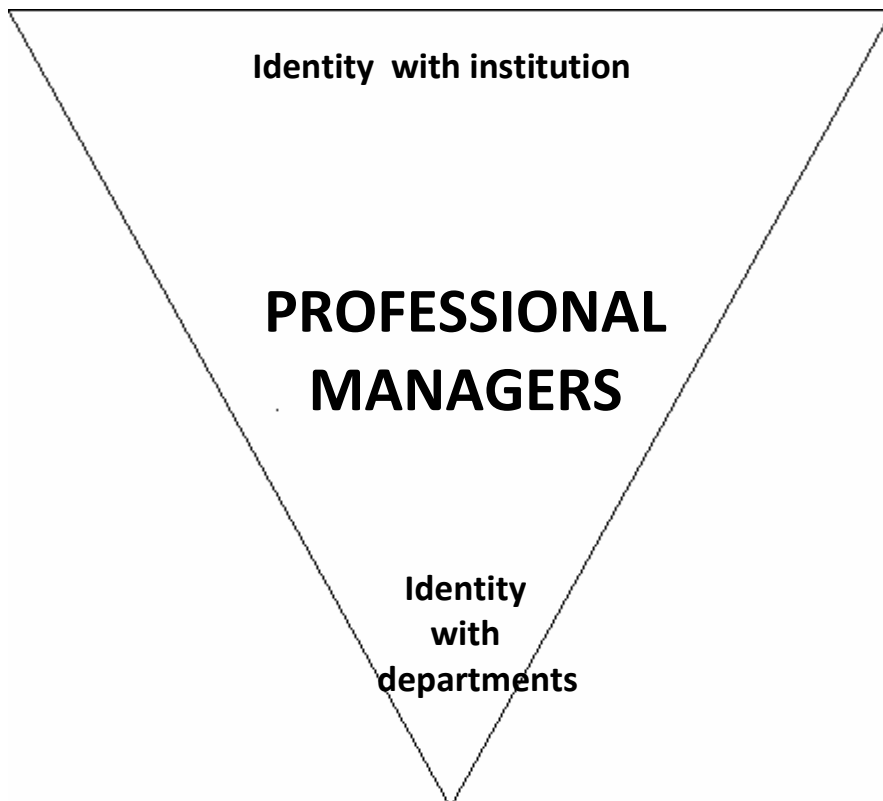


Figure Two. Situational identity of professional managers.



Identity and professional relations – the way forward

Relations between professional managers and academics in UK HEIs today are far less clearly delineated than they used to be. Celia Whitchurch's analysis makes two points which are worth explicitly joining together. She points out that professional managers are now very much 'part of the 'conversation' between the academic community and the institution' (Whitchurch, 2008: 80), and that in HEIs there are 'a number of professional languages ... being spoken' (Whitchurch, 2008: 81). A conversation in a number of different languages is one open to misunderstandings and unanticipated outcomes. In other words, there is a developing 'community of practice' involving professional managers and academics, which can be called such because it is able demonstrate 'mutual engagement, a negotiated joint purpose and a shared repertoire or resources and practice' (Handal, 2008: 58).

However, in most institutions there are steps which can and should be taken to encourage further the development of this community, so that it is decreasingly the case that 'academic and management agendas are seen as competing narratives' (Whitchurch, 2008: 87). This can be achieved by a focus on two levels: first, the cultural level of institutional values and mission, and second, the structural/policy level, where more inclusive structures which promote a commonality of purpose and status, rather than perpetuating a divide, can be put in place.

The easier of these two areas to deal with is the structural. In most institutions there is scope for the promotion of a more cohesive and less divisive approach, although the degree to which this is seen as necessary or desirable in individual institutions will vary according to factors such as commitment to collegiality, size, and institutional mission.

Suggestions might include:

- revising committee structures and powers, with institutions re-considering the extent to which non-academics are included as full members, as opposed to advisers, on committees. Such a model is referred to by Bob Burgess, the vice-chancellor of Leicester University, as a 'partnership model ... whereby senior management teams are composed of leading academic and administrative staff within the institution' (Burgess, 2008: 96).
- reviewing line-management arrangements. There remains a tendency in many institutions for academic line management to proceed up through heads of department, heads of school, and Deans to the Vice Chancellor, and for non-academic line management to go up through heads of non-academic departments through the Secretary/Registrar to the Vice Chancellor. This division based on the distinction between academic and non-academic, rather than on role, can sometimes lead to lack of clear authority, and consequently to poor relations between the two groups.
- encouraging staff development activities involving both professional managers and academics. The Institute of Education's MBA in Higher Education Management stands as an exemplar in this regard. As Susan Lapworth wrote of her experience on the MBA:

We all brought varying professional experience to the programme, but assumptions of difference between, for example, academics and administrators quickly dissipated as a broader collective identity began to be

constituted. We were united as a group by our desire to develop ourselves professionally and to broaden our experience of the field in which we work. This appeared to overcome the differences that demark our professional identities in the workplace. (Lapworth, 2008: 167)

At the level of institutional values and mission, specific proposals are less easy to bring forward. Nonetheless, a greater awareness by academics of the key contributions and professional skills which non-academic professional managers bring to institutions' core missions of teaching and research would enhance professional relations, as would a commitment on the part of professional managers to hold the core missions of teaching and research to the fore in their daily work and to promote them with a sensitivity towards the values of intellectual integrity and academic freedom. The aim is not for managerialism to triumph over collegiality, nor collegiality over managerialism, but rather to develop a flexible combinatory approach sensitive to the context of the contemporary HEI.

Such attitudinal stances are not absent from UK HEIs today, but nor can their enhancement be achieved merely by the issuing of a new mission statement or set of core values. Supported by structural change, driven by the need to keep institutions financially healthy in order to enable successful academic endeavour, and evolving with generational change, as new employees see nothing unusual in academics and non-academic professional managers coming together as part of the emerging profession of higher education manager, such attitudinal shifts are both possible and necessary.

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