Chapter 3
Professional Knowledge Workers: Tensions and Binaries

Andrea Simpson
La Trobe University, Australia

Tanya Fitzgerald
La Trobe University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The pressures of fiscal constraints, increased competition, and rapidly developing information technology have resulted in the modern university adopting business models of operation. As a consequence, teaching and learning have become products and students have become consumers. The net effect of these changes has been the expansion of specialist administrative and management work in universities: work that is undertaken by both professional staff and manager-academics. Arguably, it is these managerial practices that now drive the research and knowledge functions of the university, rather than the other way around. Typically, professional staff members, also known as “general,” “non-academic,” or “administrative” staff, now comprise the majority of the modern university workforce across Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The changing roles and importance of these professional staff members is explored by describing their number, function, roles, and gender breakdown across higher education providers. In this chapter, the authors examine the growing influence of professional staff in the university’s binary organizational structure of the “non-academic” versus the academic. The tensions this binary system creates in the perceptions of the relative status of one type of work and workers in higher education over another are interrogated with particular regard to staff diversity. The blurring of the binary is highlighted as academics move into managerial roles and the work of professional staff cuts across academic and administrative domains.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6202-5.ch003
INTRODUCTION

For almost three decades, the introduction of the tenets of New Public Management (NPM) has stimulated sweeping changes in universities across Europe, the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand. Ostensibly aimed at increasing efficiency and accountability, reforms have imported corporate principles and practices into higher education.

These changes have prompted the development of business strategies, strong management teams and a proliferation of cross-institutional support units concerned with student administration, quality assurance, teaching and learning, research management and staff development. Centralized units such as finance, human resources, marketing, facilities management, research management, policy and governance, quality assurance and information technologies form part of the new corporate bureaucracy of higher education (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). It is not unusual for staff to work across multiple portfolios in what can only be termed the invisible maze of university administration.

The result of these shifting structures is that much of the control in universities now rests in the administrative centre (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Although attention has been paid to the changing nature of academic labor (Blackmore et al., 2010; Rhoades, 1998), the specialization and professionalization of administrative work have not received the same attention. This lack of emphasis is due in part to the traditional binary that has operated in universities between academic and administrative work. This binary is reflected in the extensive literature (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007; Fitzgerald, White & Gunter, 2012; Walker & Nixon, 2004) that highlights the concept of the academic periphery and institutional centre (Clark, 1998) and the managed academic and managerial professional (Rhoades, 1998).

Broadly speaking, academic work has encompassed research, teaching and university service that together constitute a contribution to the creation and advancement of knowledge (Marginson, 2000). Management roles such as Head of School (HoS) or Head of Department (HoD) have been undertaken on a rotational and fractional basis. Specialists with the requisite qualifications and training have taken up corporate roles such as finance, human resources, marketing and property management. More generalist roles such as receptionists, student services officers, course administrators and secretarial services support the core functions of universities. Frequently labeled as “general staff”, “support staff” or “administrative staff”, this hidden workforce comprised 55.9 per cent of the overall Australian university workforce in 2011 (Castleman & Allen, 1995; Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2011).

Our purpose in this chapter is to highlight the changing nature and importance of professional work within universities. We suggest that terms such as “administrative staff”, “support staff”, or “non–academic staff” neither adequately describe the multifaceted nature of this work nor the complexities of professional roles. We examine how these labels can disguise marginalized patterns of employment within the university hierarchy. We also interrogate the statistical profile of the professional workforce across Australia’s 39 universities as well as in the United Kingdom to demonstrate how groups who have traditionally experienced workplace discrimination, such as women, are more predominant at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy.

BACKGROUND

The Australian and United Kingdom higher education systems share a number of similarities. In both countries, higher education institutions
Related Content

Access to Higher Education for People with Disabilities: A Chinese Perspective
Luanjiao Hu and Jing Lin (2017). *The Future of Accessibility in International Higher Education* (pp. 70-87).
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/access-to-higher-education-for-people-with-disabilities/181937?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/access-to-higher-education-for-people-with-disabilities/181937?camid=4v1a)

Graduate Study Abroad: Student Learning, Pedagogy, and Outcomes
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/graduate-study-abroad/164134?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/graduate-study-abroad/164134?camid=4v1a)

Practical Strategies for Rural-Serving Community College Global Programming
Marc Thomas (2019). *Study Abroad Opportunities for Community College Students and Strategies for Global Learning* (pp. 228-241).
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/practical-strategies-for-rural-serving-community-college-global-programming/219837?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/practical-strategies-for-rural-serving-community-college-global-programming/219837?camid=4v1a)

Asian International Graduate Students' Academic and Social Experiences in American Higher Education
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/asian-international-graduate-students-academic-and-social-experiences-in-american-higher-education/146762?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/asian-international-graduate-students-academic-and-social-experiences-in-american-higher-education/146762?camid=4v1a)