



On the Very Model of a Modern Major Manager: The Importance of Academic Administrators in Support of the New Pedagogy

Trevor Knight^{1*} and Carl Senior^{1,2}

¹School of Life & Health Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom, ²University of Gibraltar, Gibraltar

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The shifting nature of organizational practice within higher education (HE) is such that the contemporary university may, at this stage of its evolution, be completely unrecognizable from the haven of liberal education first described by Cardinal Newman in the early nineteenth century (see, e.g., Senior et al., 2017a). Unlike these small elite institutions, the modern day university is more akin to the pluralistic “multiversity” first described by Charles Kerr in 2001. This model for an effective institute is one that is immediately recognizable as a modern day enterprise with a diverse portfolio of large-scale research activities informing an equally diverse portfolio of large-scale academic programs (Kerr, 2001). One only has to spend a short period of time in any modern day university to realize that Kerr’s model for a university is very much the dominant design within the global HE sector. Such diversity breeds a new psychology in the individuals who govern HE institutes and needs to be considered to ensure that despite its complexity HE is still delivered effectively.

Throughout most HE institutes, the delivery of effective academic programs is dependent on a number of key stakeholder groups namely the students, the Professoriate as well as the academic administrators.¹ Each stakeholder group contributes to academic program delivery and governance processes, but the nature and distribution of the contribution has been influenced by the rate at which institutional complexity is developing. Thus, the growing complexity of an institute may impact effective governance and this, in turn, may adversely impact the student learning experience.

Akin to Kerr’s concept of a multiversity, a contemporary university is a vibrant and almost constantly changing environment that inspires a unique type of mentality in the individuals who chose to work in the field. Indeed, this particular employment sector is distinct insofar as its workers, i.e., the Professoriate² are remarkably satisfied with the working environment. While financial remuneration varies considerably across the sector, this is not the prime incentive for engagement within this profession (Luna-Arocas and Tang, 2004). Rather it is the opportunity to engage autonomously within a collegial working environment (Ambrose et al., 2005). Members of the Professoriate benefit from a so-called psychological contract with various organizational components that serve as both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators [Murlis and Hartle (1996); see also Cullinane and Dundon (2006)]. The professorial contribution to governance process tends to be carried out by means of reputation. This may be a result of their profile as a scholar or leader of a (most likely international) research program; their acknowledged disciplinary expertise; or their experience and status as an academic or professional (Corrall and Lester, 1996).

¹We recognize that additional stakeholder groups, such as technical staff or professional practitioners, are also essential to the delivery of some academic programmes.

²We fully acknowledge that academic staff can constitute a range of other titles than merely being a “Professor” but for the sake of simplicity we have grouped all together here.

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*Correspondence:

Trevor Knight
t.knight@aston.ac.uk

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Conversely, students are more likely to engage directly with the governance of a particular program if they can see how such engagement directly benefits post-graduate employment (Senior et al., 2017b). Such engagement is tenuous at best and despite the obvious advantages for experiential learning (Carini et al., 2006), there still remains considerable work to be carried out to explore the means by which students can be encouraged to be more involved in the governance of their learning.

Compared to the relatively static roles of the Professoriate and student, the role of the university administrator has undergone considerable changes and now represents what many regard as being a fundamental stakeholder in the governance of most HE institutes (Whitchurch, 2006). However, despite the importance of the administrator's role, satisfaction in this group of stakeholders is remarkably low (Glick, 1992) with many administrators citing a range of issues from a lack of a clear professional identity, lack of an incentive to innovate, to a reduced role in effective management of the managerial process (Volkwein and Parmley, 2000). Such a low level of occupational satisfaction experienced by the administrative cohort may be in part due to their (mis) perceived position within the academic community where they are often regarded by academic colleagues as being “*underachieving, overpaid supernumeraries, who jobs are part of an unnecessary bureaucracy and prime candidates for replacement by smart machines*” (Corrall and Lester, 1996, p. 84).

Here, we adopt a different view and argue that academic administrators are not only essential for the successful day-to-day execution of the various service provisions of a successful university and its academic programs but are central to the realization of the modern day multiversity as described above. The importance of their role can be understood when one considers their removal. This scenario has already been initiated with some institutes reducing administrative staff numbers to save costs; thus, transferring more administrative responsibilities to the Professoriate. This strategy may at first seem to produce cost savings in the short term but it is one that will inevitably see the Professoriate move away from the development and delivery of the core academic service that they are contracted to deliver, i.e., research and scholarly informed teaching; a move that will ultimately lead to a diminution of the overall learning experience for the key consumer group in a university, namely the student.

There is no doubt that as the modern day university increases in scope and size, a number of issues with regard to its inherent complexity will arise that will influence the relationship between these three stakeholder groups. These issues will likely manifest as tensions between the individuals who inhabit each of these roles and when such boundary disputes occur they have the potential to significantly impact on the learning environment. However, there are positive opportunities and benefits if the stakeholder relationship can adapt effectively to change. The contemporary HE environment is inherently flexible and, thus, innovative practice can be embedded as a central ethos throughout the management of academic programs. How could such organizational flexibility be used to empower academic administrators who, as reported above, report very low job satisfaction and may not feel inclined to innovate within their role?

As previously noted, Kerr's vision of a multiversity is a complex and ever-changing environment that is both sensitive to external factors, such as competition and legislation as well as internal drivers, such as student satisfaction. Given such complexity, it is inevitable that occupational roles will cross over. Such boundary-crossing behaviors occur when an individual role may cross over with the activities of another person's work and when it does this can cause a variety of disputes (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2000). Within academia—examples of such boundary crossing can be seen with roles such as the research active technician or even the subject specialist librarian who may even have PhDs but whose primary purpose is to deliver academic support services. In addition to this, the development of the professorial administrator, which is rapidly becoming *de rigor* in most academic institutions presents a clear example of the type of hybrid role exemplified by the boundary crossing ethos facilitated by the everyday complexity within a modern day university. Here, institutional managers are faced with a problem—move forward and professionalize the administrative workforce and raise occupational satisfaction but risk disputes arising from colleagues whose roles crossover. One possible solution to empower the cadre of administrators would be to further develop the relationship between the administrators, professoriate, and the students.

There have been previous attempts to consolidate the roles of the various governance stakeholder groups in HE and they have had a variety of results (Kanji et al., 1999). However, what they all have in place is the formation of a common steering core—a dedicated cadre of individuals who are responsible for the day-to-day management of the delivery of academic programs (Whitchurch, 2006). Here, we not only argue that the development of such a common core facilitates innovation but it is also a crucial and essential component to the sustained delivery of excellence across the sector. Within such a common core a genuine partnership between skilled, informed, and valued academic and administrative staff who combine their individual expertise to create a collective enhancement of the student experience and the University's operations can be formed. There is obviously a degree of value of this so-called “third space” between which may exist the Professoriate, student stakeholders, and the administrators to implement effective governance (Whitchurch, 2008).

However, is the development of a common steering core sufficient to ensure that administrative innovation is facilitated? An additional strategy that is also starting to become more and more prevalent is the move to professionalize the central cadre of administrators (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004). Such a strategy would allow academic administrators to develop a full set of professional skills required to enhance their role in the successful management of academic programs. There is no doubt that the current advocacy for an increase in administrative professionalization has much to offer. As the ranks of professional administrators increase, this could expand operational innovation and effective management practices ultimately resulting in increased student satisfaction. There is also the subsidiary benefit of an increase in the professional qualifications leading to further awards and the development of in-house programs (e.g., an MBA in Academic Administration, etc.) to support such a move. At the individual

level a professional qualification is likely to see individuals who are more empowered to lead and to debate their professorial colleagues on program delivery matters. However, given the complexity of a modern day university, the professionalization of a common core of academic administrators has considerable benefits for the effective delivery a large-scale portfolio of programs. How can HE institutes both support the development of essential administrative staff and at the same time ensure that these individuals are empowered to innovate?

To address this possible issue and also facilitate an excellent learning experience an additional stage in the professionalization process is proposed. One that is informed by organizational psychology and that is to move away from the development of pseudo-teams and more toward the formation of effective or “real” administrative teams (West and Lyubovnikova, 2012). These real-teams could perhaps constitute the common steering core of a department or even an institute. They would comprise administrators with enhanced program management and governance responsibilities working collectively with the Professoriate, thus, removing historical perceived boundaries between these staff groups. Compared to a pseudo-team, a real-team is effective as team members meet together to serve a common goal with the additional opportunity to reflect on their learning during the completion of a specific task.³ Such reflective thinking allows the team members to improve on subsequent activities (Schippers et al., 2015). There is considerable evidence

stating that multidisciplinary true teams are highly effective in ensuring that organizational goals are successfully met in a timely manner (Richter et al., 2011). Moreover, members of real teams also report being more empowered to innovate their practice (Schippers et al., 2015). It is, therefore, perhaps quite surprising that the presence of multidisciplinary real teams is remarkably absent throughout HE given the complex role that effective academic administrators are tasked with executing on a daily basis.

The unique complexity of the administrative role in HE drives a ubiquitous threat of boundary disputes occurring that may ultimately impact the student learning experience. Developing a common core of professional administrators with greater responsibility for the management and delivery of the academic portfolio, working closely with the Professoriate, can help address these disputes. It both empowers the academic administrator as well as the Professoriate which will in turn facilitate job satisfaction. Furthermore, by ensuring that that the people who inhabit this “third space” or common core have an opportunity to reflect on their day-to-day activities, it may be possible to develop an effective administrative mechanism by where innovation is common practice. This proposed model would ensure that the delivery of the academic portfolio is constantly refined to ensure that it meets the growing expectations of the modern day student.

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All authors have contributed equally to this work.

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³ Any team of workers completing any task can operate in either a real or pseudo-team fashion. Take, for example, a team of painters decorating a wall who traditionally tend to operate in a pseudo-team fashion with limited opportunity for discussion during the task. However, it is the opportunity to meet and discuss progress that allow for individual learning to occur that can subsequently improve the task at hand.

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