



Conference on

**Trends in the management of human resources
in higher education**

**Evolution in academic career structures
in English universities**

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It has been recognised that institutional strategies are impacting on academic roles and career paths (Gordon, 2003) but this is suggested as adaptive and evolutionary (Henkel, 2000).

This paper suggests that in England we are witnessing the early stages of a step change toward greater diversification, fractionalisation, specialisation and differentiation of academic functions (Høstaker, 2000). This accelerated change, as evidenced by the early adopters, is described as the product of a booster effect created by the combination of national policy and employee relations agreements. The paper describes the experience of the University of Southampton as an early adopter in pointing to the adaptations and problems which may arise more widely and the questions this raises about the future nature of academia. It concludes by suggesting the need for a new map of academic career paths and choices to replace the traditional hierarchical ladder.

Introduction

This paper starts out in agreement with Henkel (2002) that the concept of identity has been of central symbolic and instrumental significance, both in the lives of individual academics and in the workings of the academic profession. The view of who is an academic and who is not, a shared sense of level and status and recognised titles allows, for example, peer review reports for assessing promotion considerations internationally. This shared and so fixed, at least fixed in the collective understanding of the participants, view of what an academic career is comes under pressure as institutions seek to adapt the profession to the requirements of their mission. Single institution adaptation is unlikely to succeed as it will not be universally recognised, and the traditional career structures and their associated behaviour patterns cannot be out-competed by any localised alternative. The present context in England is, therefore, interesting as all Higher Education institutions are required to introduce locally agreed new pay and grading structures including for academic staff by August 2006. This will produce, or could produce many variants, not all of which will persist, but even as what emerges consolidates the picture may not be the one we recognise today. The academic profession in England is at the beginning of a two or three year period of change without uniformity, at least not immediately, on the variations which will emerge. The traditional academic career is not extinct but it will have to live alongside variations of their own species that academics may not immediately recognise.

English National Policy context for Human Resources management

Universities in England are relatively autonomous self-governing institutions with their own Charter and a governing Council. These institutions do however, receive public funding, to varying degrees, for both teaching and research and so are subject to public policy asserted either through legislation or through the Research Councils or by the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCE). These bodies variously have strings or conditions associated with their funding. From a policy perspective, the national Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (in the UK) chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (1997) and the Independent Review of Higher Education Pay and Conditions Chaired by Sir Michael Bett (1999), stated that improvements in Human Resource Management (HRM) within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was required. In the grant letter to HEFCE in 2000, the Secretary of State for Education (for England) made £330M of funding available for the three year period (2001/2 to 2003/4) to HEIs in England against certain objective criteria requiring each to produce and submit for assessment a Human Resources Strategy for the funds to be released; the so called "Rewarding and Developing Staff" initiative (R&DS).

HEIs in England wholly, but not exclusively, voluntarily belong by subscription to the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) an employers association. UCEA had traditionally, through national collective bargaining, set the staff pay, grading and conditions rules for HEIs in the UK with their consent. One outcome of the Bett Report (1999) was the establishment of a new national Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES). This body agreed a national Framework Agreement allowing each HEI to design its own pay and grading arrangements provided that they used a national 51 point single pay spine and adhered to certain common agreed principles. This came about as a result of pressure from some larger HEIs who threatened to leave UCEA without more latitude to reflect their priorities in their HRM policies. Those UK institutions faced the challenge of attracting and retaining high quality faculty in a competitive international marketplace and so increasingly strained against national grades and pay scales.

An evaluation of the "Rewarding and Developing Staff" initiative conducted for HEFCE by management consultants KPMG reported that as the R&DS initiative applied only to HEIs funded by HEFCE, it did not extend to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. This was significant as stakeholders with a UK wide remit reported a systematic 'booster' effect occurring in HRM practices in HEIs in England not seen in the other countries making up the UK.

The R&DS funding was paid directly to HEIs, that is not through UCEA or JNCHES as national intermediaries, and one of HEFCE's criteria or 'strings' was that English HEIs achieve equal pay for equal work, using institution-wide systems of job evaluation (JE). This objective combined with the resulting National Framework Agreement from JNCHES permitting members of UCEA to develop as sought local pay structures and using the R&DS funding, created a dynamic for local design of institution specific pay and grading structures. HEIs were given a national mandate, the freedom, the financial resources and had the competitive motivation to localise and improve HRM including pay structures. The Trades Unions through the national single pay spine, a model grading structure, a library of national job profiles and their negotiating stance are seeking to get as much uniformity of outcome between HEIs as they can achieve.

Evolutionary differentiation in Academic Careers

HEIs in England from 2006/7 will charge tuition fees for teaching, with most charging the maximum permitted fee of £3,000 and offering bursaries or scholarships to attract students in the profiles sought. As HEIs compete for students and in a market that has tuition fees the need to offer an integrated high quality student experience has been highlighted. In addition, HEIs in England are, to different degrees depending on their mission, pursuing research and enterprise and innovation agendas including developing spin-out companies, licensing and patenting and offering consultancy services to commercial clients. HEIs in England continue to value and to be rewarded for research prowess. As Henkel (2002) states, these variant institutional missions are a product of strategic choice seeking to maximise income generation.

This increasing and variant breadth of purposes between HEI's requires the emergence, recognition and reward of new roles and career pathways which have descriptive criteria equal in standard and status to the traditional academic roles but appropriate to the new variant demands. While traditional academic career structures remain strong, they differ between types of institution and between countries. The simple vertical ladder of Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader (within the UK) and Professor is well recognised and understood. However, in England, despite the uniform nomenclature, differences in academic roles and status are now quickly emerging within and between institutions to fit increasingly divergent missions given the provided freedom and external pressures. Some consideration has been given by one or two English Universities to adopt the American nomenclature of Assistant, Associate and full Professor but none have adopted it at the time of writing. If a few do move in this direction it will be interesting to observe whether and how quickly the rest feel it necessary to follow. Kogan, Moses and El-Khawas (1994) reported on the IMHE project on 'Policies for Staffing in Higher Education' and suggested that a new academic mandate was needed, explicitly marrying traditional scholarly values with changing demands on higher education. They noted, however, that academic staffing structures were diversifying without that new mandate so causing tensions of status, reward, motivation and opportunity. By contrast, Henkel (2000) in 'Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education', reported that academics had responded to widespread and powerful policy change in an evolutionary way retaining core components of their professional identity. This evolutionary metaphor is supported by Høstaker (2000) who suggests that while he found important institutional differences in the relative influence of institution policies the general and continuing trend was toward greater diversification, fractionalisation, specialisation and differentiation of academic functions which posed new challenges for career paths.

When individual academics are allowed or even encouraged to reshape or reduce what was previously a composite bundle of roles some differentiation or adaptation must arise. For example, if an outstanding academic researcher seeks to buy themselves out of their teaching activity this rarely seems to present problems in the future career path of such successful researchers. However, temporary grant funded researchers also do not teach but do not seem to have the same opportunities ahead of them causing tensions of status and reward, as highlighted by Kogan, Moses and El-Khawas (1994). Likewise, in England research intensive universities, in seeking to optimise their staff profile for the HEFCE Research Assessment Exercise excluded academic staff who did not have a high research profile from their lists of

research active staff. Given such staff would not then attract research funding they in large part took on teaching or academic administrative activities perhaps for negative reasons, in that they were escaping an area of weakness rather than exercising a strength. Academic staff who had positively chosen a career path based on educational excellence may have felt their choice de-valued as a result.

Tuition fees create a different environmental pressure to meet the needs of a diverse set of learners, to prepare academics for a teaching role and positively to select good educators or educational innovators for that role. Gordon (2003) says excellence in teaching is still in most institutions perceived as attracting less prestige and reward than excellence in research, notwithstanding attempts by many institutions to revise their promotion criteria. Women, excellent educators and contract researchers all potentially act as forces inside institutions against the status-quo.

Masculinity as the normal basis for career design

There is much research on the barriers women face in academia and identifies this as a global phenomenon. Academic career management in the UK seems to rely on recruiting talent by seeking out recognised experts for hire, managing exit through pushing poorly performing individuals into retirement or to other opportunities in their sector or elsewhere. Also characteristic are internal and external contests for advancement against criteria and delivering very little academic training post-appointment, given the high expertise and high portability of the skill base. In this climate Georgi (2000) says scientists need to be assertive and competitive to succeed but asks “are these characteristics really necessary to do good science?” His belief is that curiosity and persistence, for example, are more important. Bailyn (2003) suggests that in present structures the perfect academic is someone who gives total priority to work and has no outside interests or responsibilities. In the UK the HEFCE research assessment exercise was criticised by the Association of University Teachers (AUT) who produced a report ‘Gender and Research activity in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise’ published in July 2004 which found that of those academic staff in England considered research active in the 2001 assessment exercise, only 25% were women and so it was claimed the assessment was potentially indirectly discriminatory.

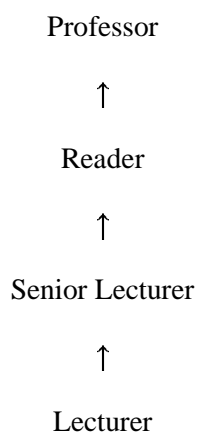
The present or recent historical uniformity of structure may contain obstacles for minority or disadvantaged groups that a greater diversity of career paths or a changing pattern may affect and so those groups could and should lobby for change.

University of Southampton as a case study ‘early adopter’

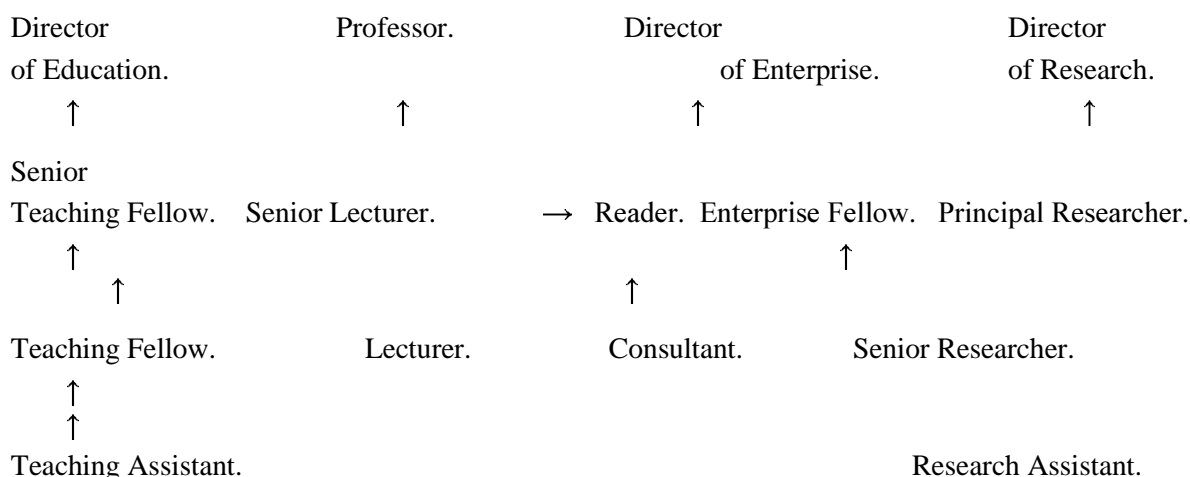
The Human Resources Strategy submitted by the University of Southampton to HEFCE under the R&DS initiative became one of only 17 out of 130 submitted by universities and colleges in the UK to be assessed by HEFCE as achieving ‘full’ status in the first funding round in 2001/2. Southampton was the first institution to implement the national framework agreement in higher education by introducing new local pay and grading structures on a single pay spine using a single job evaluation system by institutional collective agreement. Southampton’s approach involved designing a new pay and grading structure based on perceived career pathways for academic and other staff and for this reason as an individual case study it points to what can be expected in England as other institutional agreements follow now and over the next two years. However, it is not clear whether institutions should all adapt in their own way producing localised role variants and titles of their own, or whether at least some sharing if not some new uniformity should be sought. The Higher Education Trades Unions in the UK are one force acting for national uniformity but in a way which is perceived presently as a defence of the status-quo. The other force is, of course, competitive pressure where each HEI must not be seen to be disadvantaged for staff recruitment against their peer institutions which is comparative and inflationary by nature. The University of Southampton, having an Education, Research and Enterprise Career Pathway with choices within for a rounded contribution or for roles which are dominated by one aspect is generating or accelerating the

process of diversification, fractionalisation and specialisation and so recognises the ‘booster’ effect. Southampton observes or allows an increasing array of academic roles and titles alongside the traditional pathway. Teaching and research assistants and fellows, research or teaching only academics, academic administrators, learning and teaching co-ordinators, academic consultants, enterprise fellows, directors of research and of education alongside the more traditional professor. The simple ‘ladder’ image is no longer enough to describe the plethora of academic roles and titles found in practice. However, prematurity means few if any attempts have been made to develop a new ‘map’ of academic staffing with connections between these different and emerging roles.

The traditional academic career path in a research-led English University, which Southampton used, may look like a ‘ladder’ as follows:



The new ‘map’ showing what the career path now emerging looks like is far more complicated and choice ridden, as follows:



Points of Continuity

Within the range of adaptations are there any observable constants? Henkel (2002) reports that some academics, particularly in the context of their educational responsibilities, explicitly saw sustaining the discipline as an end in itself. Certainly in the UK the Research Assessment Exercise had units of assessment organised around academic disciplines. However, these disciplines are no longer uniformly

congruent with the institutional organisation of academics into Schools or Departments. The emergence of big themes which transcend individual subjects, such as the environment or genetics, also challenge notions of discipline. As research projects become inter-disciplinary increasing numbers of academics may find themselves working in teams outside of their own sense of being an autonomous researcher and outside their own subject discipline to which they relate or from which they come. Pioneers can shift their career path across the boundary but many find they suffer the prior subject prejudices of value and esteem from either side. Many act as specialist consultants who bring particular discipline skills to the project they are working on.

The next point of continuity may be a sense of being defined as an 'academic', regardless of discipline which may itself have become unclear or at least a matter of choice for some people. The term academic is problematic as it is not self-defining. It covers, or seeks to cover, researchers, teachers, entrepreneurs, consultants, academic leaders and so on. It seems that academics can substitute research for teaching or vice versa and remain an academic. Those in academic leadership roles will sometimes surrender teaching duties. The question arises, if someone does not teach or research but co-ordinates or develops the curriculum, the learning and teaching activity, ensures quality assurance methodologies exist, encourages good teaching practice and educational innovation then are they still an academic or not? They are certainly closely involved in the academic endeavour and academics to a greater or lesser extent perform these roles but perhaps not exclusively. It is not obvious what an academic is in any specific sense.

It is suggested (Henkel, 2004) that the idea of a nexus between research and teaching is influential, that students benefit by being taught by leading-edge researchers rather than educators and the correlation of RAE scores and teaching assessment scores in England arguably demonstrates excellence in research leads to teaching excellence. In the research intensive as opposed to the vocation-led universities, this may be because the objective is seen as to develop the students as researchers.

Defillippi and Arthur (1994) argue that in a context in which the fixed lattices of job positions and stable career paths have been eliminated such boundary-less careers are followed by exploiting core competencies which they define as know-why, know-how and know-whom competencies. Certainly in producing descriptive criteria for the academic career pathway at each level one is driven back from definitions or classifications to the competencies for role holders or standards of output as the differentiating measure.

It is not clear what the points of continuity might be, given the lack of certainty operating on several levels around academia itself, discipline, the place of teaching and research in an academic role and the relative value of each.

However, just because the career structures are emerging at institutional level contingent on local strategies does not preclude convergent evolution through parallel adaptations converging on the same form as institutions adapt to similar problems. A new continuity may emerge.

Academics as rational beings.

Without specific research it is not possible to say whether if an academic at the early stage of their career were presented with a modelled set of choices and consequences in relation to future possible career pathways whether they would act as rational beings or be motivated only by seeking seniority. Academic staff, like others, will have skills or the ability to develop them but they will also have interests and values. So even if it is clear that a particular career choice is limiting in the sense of lessening the chances of future seniority compared with another it may still be taken based in beliefs about the value of that activity, the academics interest in it or the source of personal value gained from work as an activity. Even if

Universities can be clear about their career pathways as they emerge this does not mean that staff will follow the routes expressed in the numbers required for each activity but may as now shape the career model through their lived out behaviour and choices.

The impact outside the UK

The combination of national government policy on tuition fees, the national framework agreement from JNCHES and the R&DS funding from HEFCE mean that academic career structures in the UK are or will as a result be adapting or changing as can be seen in Southampton as an 'early adopter'. This national specific 'booster' effect is causing, alongside the re-design of pay and grading structures, an acceleration in emerging forms of research, education, enterprise and academic management roles. Within these changes academic staff are making their own career choices related to their own perception of their personal strengths and weaknesses in competency but also based on their views of the emerging opportunities and likely future obstacles. The UK itself can let this evolution happen, observe it and share adaptations or seek to direct or report on the progress of change (which is not happening yet). More broadly, Europe can see England as an island where career adaptation is taking its own curious and perhaps temporary evolutionary path or seek to more closely observe and evaluate the results. Like all evolutionary changes not all the resulting variations will survive and be successful and so reproduce elsewhere. The traditional academic ladder and titles may survive and resist novelty, especially if England is in a unique context with particular nationally specific stimuli.

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