Another matrix revolution?

The overlap of university work

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> Imagining more productive relationships in higher education, in ways that do not look nostalgically backwards to an older, more elitist system, may be part of the first steps towards realising universities as more humane places in which to practise (Clegg & McAuley 2005, p. 13).

There may be a perception among academic staff that professional staff are remote from academic activities (Wallace & Marchant, 2011), however, recent research demonstrates that professional staff, across a range of roles and seniority levels, are interested and engaged in supporting positive student learning outcomes (Graham, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). The improved understanding of the work of professional staff that is emerging provides opportunity for substantial changes to practice and policy. Building on Whitchurch's (2008a, 2009) typology of bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded and blended professionals, this research shows that professional staff span all four professional identities and show movement towards the third space (Graham, 2013a). Although Whitchurch (2008a) developed her framework for professional staff at management levels, this research extends the framework to more junior roles, reinforcing Whitchurch's contention that third space work is 'indicative of future trends in professional identities' (2008b, p. 377). Yet, like the overlap model (Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013), the Whitchurch typology describes a linear continuum of professional identities from routine professionals through to traditional academics. This limitation may miss a deeper complexity of higher education professional identities, which is addressed in the proposed matrix model.

Rather than a binary divide between professional and academic staff, or a continuum from professional and administrative to academic roles, a matrix structure as a framework in which to locate all university staff: the Roles Matrix (Figure 1) is proposed here. The dimensions of this matrix are academic focus and skills, encompassing both teaching and research, and management focus and skills. By conceptualising the roles of all university staff in a two-dimensional matrix the concept of the third space, with unbounded and blended professionals, is accommodated as shown. The matrix model is significantly more accommodating than either the Whitchurch typology or the overlap model (Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013). The two-dimensional matrix could be extended into a third dimension (thereby becoming a cubic space) in order to delineate specialisations such as different academic disciplines or professional functions; however, this third dimension might unnecessarily complicate the model, and it is contended here that all positions could be mapped to the two-dimensional matrix.

Three key benefits that arise from this matrix conceptualisation relate to understanding and developing the capabilities of all staff. First, an improved understanding of the organisational capabilities of the institution could be generated by mapping individual roles to this matrix. Second, a clearer view of the potential pathways
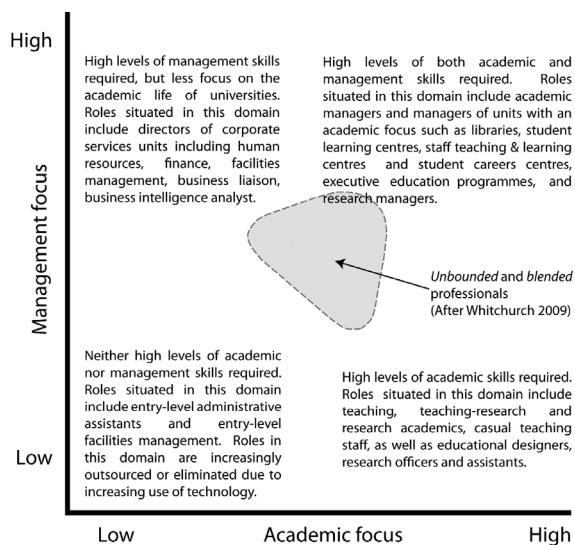
Figure 1. Roles Matrix: a two-dimensional conception of university roles

for career progressions for staff would become apparent. Thirdly, an understanding of the equivalent value of different roles could be developed. These three points will be explored below.

Mapping all roles in an institution to the two-dimensional Roles Matrix shown in Figure 1 would enable an improved understanding of staff capabilities across all functions. Such an improved understanding would benefit the institution by enhancing workforce planning through supply analysis (Anderson, 2004, p. 363), as the mapping would help to identify both capacity and gaps in the workforce. Workforce planning, or capacity planning, is a key part of business planning (Turner, 2010), and should be part of an organisation's overall talent management (Conlon *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, having better understanding of organisational capacity will assist in its development, management and alignment with institutional strategic directions, which will contribute to the achievement of organisational strategic goals.

Second, allowing staff to maximise their careers by facilitating progressions that might not be obvious or even possible with the current binary divide between academic and professional staff has individual and organisational benefits. Currently, career progression for professional staff has typically two routes: appointment to a different role at a higher-ranked level, or reclassification of a current role to a higher ranked level. In contrast, academic promotions have well-established, formal, merit-based procedures that are clearly defined (Moodie, 2002), which apply to individuals and provide 'a mechanism for

the recognition and reward of academic staff' (University of Technology, Sydney, 2012). Nevertheless, there are limitations to academic promotions, usually based on quotas at academic Levels D and above. For professional and academic staff, more flexible options for career development could be of individual benefit. Significantly, there are signs that the binary divide is starting to crumble in some locations. There are, for example, increasing numbers of professional staff in senior executive roles in Australian universities (Szekeres, 2011), and the Library Professional Staff promotions policy and the associated procedure at La Trobe University are structured very much like typical academic promotions (La Trobe University, 2012). In addition, the Enterprise Agreement that was negotiated at Curtin University in 2012 is a single agreement for professional and academic staff (Curtin University, 2012). These examples illustrate recognition of institutional benefits that accrue from having a more flexible approach to career progression for professional staff.

Third, an understanding of the equivalent value of different roles could be developed, thereby enabling the development of a single pay spine that would permit equal pay for work of equal value. There are several general organisational advantages to embedding equal pay for equal value of work, including a positive impact on female workers, a more effective use of skills and improved human resource management, better working relationships and positive effects on organisational reputation (International Labour Organization, 2011). Within the context of the higher education sector, implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal value of work could be framed using the Roles Matrix and a single pay spine. A single pay spine and lines of iso-pay – that is, lines connecting roles of equal pay – are shown in Figure 2. The current study indicates that the work of all staff is essential to students achieving their learning outcomes, and that all staff need to work together, supportively, valuing the work of their colleagues, 'to serve The University and its students' (Sharafizad, Paull & Omari, 2011, p. 47). This is contingent upon recruiting and retaining the right staff, be they professional or academic, which would be facilitated by implementation of the Roles Matrix and a single pay spine.

The Roles Matrix and the single pay spine with its lines of iso-pay, with an associated single enterprise agreement for all university staff, are somewhat radical proposals that have significant human resources and industrial relations implications. Non-salary benefits and conditions such as flexible working arrangements and systems to ensure necessary work–life balance across all roles would also need
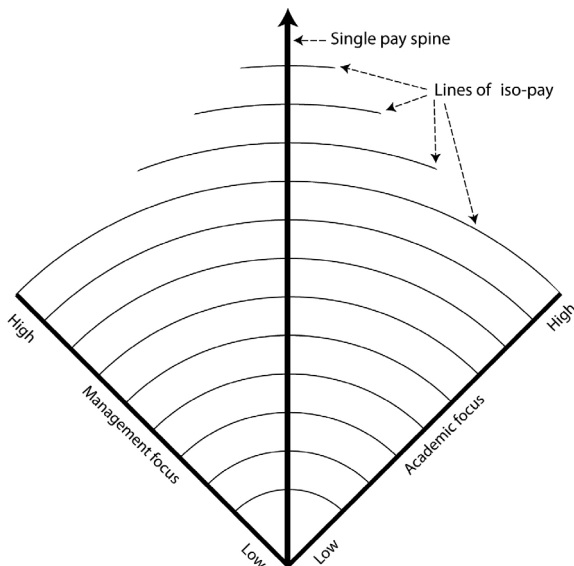
High

Management focus

Low

Single pay spine

Lines of iso-pay

High

Academic focus

Low

Figure 2. Single pay spine showing lines of iso-pay

to be equitably provided to all staff. Given these potential complexities, it would be useful to learn from the UK experience, where equivalence was determined across all professional and academic positions (other than clinical academics) (Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff, n.d.), and a single pay spine has been implemented progressively across UK universities since 2006 (University and College Union, n.d.). The UK implementation did not conceive of a matrix approach, however, and a binary divide remains between the roles for academic and professional staff. Nevertheless, given the increasing external forces on higher education (Fullan & Scott, 2009), it is imperative that universities make the most of all staff to help them achieve their potentials, while developing a talent pool that can assist universities meet the challenges of increasing accountability.

United we stand, divided we fall.

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