

Chapter 6

The Influence of New Higher Education Professionals on Academic Work

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6.1 Introduction

In Germany, as in many other European countries, governments have been withdrawing from close state control of their higher education institutions, thus, granting them more institutional autonomy with the expectation that this will enable them to react faster and more flexibly to external demands and challenges. In line with these developments traditional state steering models have been increasingly substituted for what is nowadays called governance, i.e. including external stakeholders in strategic decision making and coordinating a variety of actors on various levels. The reforms have frequently been described as developing higher education institutions from being an institution to becoming an organisation and enable them to become actors (cf. Meier 2009; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). The growing organisational autonomy with its increasing capacity for strategic decision-making also entails the expectation that institutional leadership should become more professional. University presidents and their teams are increasingly often appointed rather than elected from among the professoriate of a given higher education institutions. Even Deans are appointed in a number of countries nowadays and there is talk about developing these positions into a regular professional career. However, there is another phenomenon which has been accompanying such changes. This is the growth in numbers of new groups of mostly highly qualified professionals to support organisational change and decision-making. These persons are not primarily active in research and teaching themselves but entrusted to prepare and support decisions of the management, establish new services or professionalise traditional ones, and actively shape the core activities of the

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U. Teichler, W.K. Cummings (eds.), *Forming, Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession*, The Changing Academy – The Changing Academic Profession in International Comparative Perspective 14, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-16080-1_6

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organisation. We have called this group the new “higher education professionals” (HEPROs).

This contribution will first say something about the state of research, then present findings from surveys and interviews with HEPROs in Germany as well as selected other European countries, before coming to conclusions.

6.2 State of Research

The group of highly qualified people that we call “the new higher education professionals” (HEPROs for short) has been analysed in several studies, although they were given different names. Whitchurch (2008c) calls them “third space professionals” because they operate in an independent space which is neither strictly academic nor strictly administrative. Macfarlane (2011) calls them “para-academics” because their concrete job tasks might be the result of an up-skilling of formerly administrative and professional support staff or of a de-skilling of formerly academic staff. Rhoades (1998, 2001) refers to them as “managerial professionals” or “support professionals” and Deem (1998) as “manager academics”. At the temporary endpoint of a rich body of research accumulated in the past two decades mainly in Australia, Great Britain, Norway, and the United States two research trails can be identified:

- A quantitative trail which analyses what is sometimes called the bureaucratisation of universities (cf. Gornitzka et al. 1998), at other times the ‘managerial revolution’ (cf. Amaral et al. 2003), and growing numbers of upper level administrative positions;
- A qualitative trail shedding light on changing academic work environments and challenging relationships between academic staff and higher education professionals.

All studies – a good summary can be found in Schneijderberg and Merkator (2013) – demonstrate one important issue, namely that it is time to overcome “the simple dichotomy of administrative versus academic staff” (Rhoades 1998, p. 116).

The growing demands for organisational development and professionalization of university governance at central and departmental level have been identified as causes for the evolution and differentiation of functions and tasks in the area between administration, top level management, and the core academic business of teaching and research. Teichler (2005) has identified four basic areas of tasks and functions:

- Preparation and support of management decisions (e.g. assistants to the rector or president or dean, heads of central administration units, institutional researchers);
- Professionalised services (e.g. librarians, career consultants);

- A new hybrid sphere between management and services (e.g. quality managers, heads of international offices, coordinators of study programmes, doctoral programmes or graduate schools);
- Differentiation of teaching and research functions (e.g. student counsellors, curriculum designers, coordinators of research clusters of large scale distributed research groups).

The two phenomena of a (growing) culture of management and a more traditional academic culture within universities open the realm for a discussion of the interface between management and academics which is exactly inhabited by higher education professionals (i.e. Whitchurch's "third space"). Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that recent studies (Schneijderberg et al. 2013; Fumasoli et al. 2014) were able to show that the emergence and increase in numbers of higher education professionals is closely related to the degree of managerial governance in higher education institutions. Thus, higher education professionals are not (yet) regarded as a distinguishable phenomenon in Central and Eastern European countries (for example, Poland, Croatia and Romania) while they have become an important part of university governance in forerunner countries of managerial governance approaches like the UK and the Netherlands (cf. Kehm and Lanzendorf 2006).

Basically the question of who higher education professionals are and what they do touches upon a broad range of issues in higher education research, such as professionalization, organisational research, governance, and management.

6.3 Empirical Findings

6.3.1 *HEPROs in Germany*

INCHER-Kassel has recently been involved in two large research projects analysing the new higher education professionals in Europe. The first one was a 3 years project funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research which analysed the role of HEPROs in activities to improve teaching and learning. The second was a 3 years project (EUROAC) funded by the German Research Association and supported by the European Science Foundation which looked into the changes of the academic profession in eight European countries. The German part of the project analysed the role of HEPROs between management and the academy mainly in Germany, however, with a comparative European dimension as well. Both projects used quantitative (questionnaires) as well as qualitative (interviews) approaches. In the following selected results of both research projects will be presented (cf. also Kehm et al. 2010).

6.3.1.1 Let Us First Come to the Question “Who Are They”?

The majority of HEPROs in Germany are female (60 %). Seventy-nine percent have a Master degree and one quarter of our respondents (n = 1,000) even a PhD. Many have experiences in research and teaching. More than half have permanent positions but their position in the framework of the organisational structures varies considerably. More than two thirds reported that with the creation of their position a new job was created as well. In these cases the employment tends to be project-based and fixed-term in the beginning. Tenure is offered on the basis of proven usefulness. About one quarter state that they carry out advisory, supervision, support, and information activities, 19 % said that they had leadership functions and 17 % characterised their work tasks as coordinating, organising and managing. HEPROs state that they have considerable room for shaping their job and much is dependent on their own initiative. They often work at interfaces, their tasks are multi-functional, and they act as trouble-shooters and jump in upon request. Frequently they understand their job as helping to shape existing work processes in a more effective, transparent, efficient, and simpler way. Their most valued skill is communication competence.

6.3.1.2 The Second Question Is “What Is Their Self-Understanding?”

Basically their self-understanding as professionals is as yet weak, although there are first initiatives to form networks. Professional identities vary to some extent depending on the unit in which HEPROs work or the level of hierarchy to which they are associated, for example strategic planning, quality management or faculty/programme management. HEPROs see themselves often as mediators between hierarchical levels or as providers of services and support for a particular group of clients (students, professors, or top level management). Being a mediator often explicitly excludes a self-understanding of controlling. Work tasks are frequently described as coordination with a high proportion of offering advice. If at all, HEPROs either refer to themselves as service providers or as members of the line management. Essentially HEPROs have a self-understanding as being generalists and experts rather than specialists and academics.

6.3.1.3 The Third Question Is “What Are They Doing”?

Our questionnaire resulted in a broad variety of HEPRO activities. Altogether 18 different areas of activity were identified. Providing advice, supervision, support and information had a high proportion of responses (almost one quarter), however, the highest proportion (27 %) was a mixture of job tasks with no clear demarcations. This would correspond to Whitchurch’s categories of “unbounded” or “blended” higher education professionals (Whitchurch 2008a, c) who focus on

broad projects with blurred boundaries of units or hierarchies and which Whitchurch later on characterised as “third space professionals” (Whitchurch 2008b). Another characterisation frequently used by the HEPROs themselves is working at interfaces or shaping new fields of professional activities. Our interviews confirm that positions for HEPROs are frequently created when there is an acute need to get something done or to implement change. For example, the implementation of the Bologna process reforms has led to a number of new jobs for HEPROs in the form of curriculum designers, Bologna advisors, quality managers and providers of support in processes of accreditation and evaluation (including graduate surveys and alumni work).

6.3.1.4 And the Final Question Is “What Kind of Conflicts Arise with Whom”?

HEPROs perceive the acceptance of their person and their work as positive, however, they are more appreciated by the institutional management than by professors, despite the fact that their self-understanding is to provide a service rather than to create new duties for professors or to control them.

Many HEPROs reported that they experienced conflicts with and tensions from professors who tend to be adverse to change. However, with growing experience they manage to deal with these conflicts and tensions and are capable to build up professional relationships and problem solving capacities. In particular, they manage to convince the professors that there are joint interests and goals. Therefore, communication competence is one of the key skills for HEPROs. However, such kinds of conflicts also indicate that academic staff experience a change of working conditions. They appreciate HEPROs as long as they feel unburdened from administrative or organisational tasks by them. Conflicts arise when academic staff either feel that they have additional work to do due to HEPRO activities or when they feel that HEPROs are meddling into what they consider academic affairs, i.e. an anticipation of de-professionalization of academic work.

HEPROs frequently complain about a high burden of work due to too many duties and tasks and about a lack of time for their own further qualification. About half of the HEPROs we have surveyed and interviewed are on fixed-term contracts. This group frequently complains about a lack of appreciation of their work, the impossibility to plan their life and a high staff fluctuation which prevents a long-term shaping of their projects and fields of expertise.

6.3.2 HEPROs in Selected European Countries

But let’s take a brief look at the general situation in Europe. Basically we can say that the number of HEPROs at any given higher education institution increases with the introduction and development of managerial governance and New Public

Management approaches. In this respect the Scandinavian countries, the UK, the Netherlands, Austria, and also Switzerland have higher education systems with more HEPROs than, for example, most of the Central and Eastern European countries. This implies that the more higher education institutions develop into managed organisations, the more HEPROs we can find.

One part of our analysis of the emergence of HEPROs in the German higher education system was a comparative look at similar developments in Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, specifically England and Wales (cf. Kottmann and Enders 2013). Despite the fact that in all countries, including Germany, the emergence of professional roles for HEPROs was triggered in the beginning by external needs and challenges, a differentiation of professional roles happened in the course of time and was guided by internal strategic needs. And these needs differed by country and were dependent on what Kottmann and Enders (2013) called the national production model of teaching and research. Therefore, we can infer that professional roles of HEPROs are a result of growing managerial autonomy and authority within institutions of higher education.

In the European countries included in the project we find two forms of differentiation of HEPRO roles: (a) Certain tasks that belonged to the classical portfolio of academic staff have become more complex and were split off to form new job positions. This has sometimes been described as a form of de-professionalisation of academic staff. (b) New tasks that could neither be assigned to the administration nor to the academic dimension were formed into HOPRO positions. This second form of differentiation is an indicator of what Rhoades (1998) has identified as an erosion of the traditional dichotomy of administrative versus academic staff.

To provide examples for the path dependency of HEPRO roles based on the national production model of teaching and research we will have a look at four countries. In Austria HEPROs emerged with the implementation of the new University Law of 2002 which gave Austrian universities complete autonomy. Before that Austrian universities were basically regarded as departments of the responsible ministry (cf. Kehm and Lanzendorf 2006). Despite the fact that universities needed human resources for all the new tasks and decision-making issues rather quickly, the collegial self-governance remained in place and academic staff took over a considerable proportion of these new tasks and items for decision-making. So here we find an enrichment of traditional academic roles. HEPROs emerged in specific areas which complemented the core tasks of the academics and took over more administrative and framing job roles.

In the Netherlands new laws have facilitated the emergence of HEPROs and their professional roles. Here we can find three groups of HEPROs: those supporting students helping them in the organisation of studies and providing counselling and pastoral care; those supporting the teaching staff by offering advice and professional training to improve teaching skills; and finally those supporting the institutional management in framing and conceptualising teaching and studies. And while the first two groups tend to take over continuous tasks, the work of the last group is organised more frequently in the form of projects.

In the United Kingdom new requirements of national higher education policy with regard to institutional efficiency and competitiveness on the one hand and quality management requirements for the organisation of teaching and studies in a high tuition fee country on the other hand have contributed to the emergence of HEPROs. Similar to the Netherlands, professional roles of HEPROs are more strongly institutionalised than in the other countries included in our comparison due to the fact that the managerial governance model has been introduced earlier. The emergence of professional roles for HEPROs can be related in particular to the challenges of quality assurance and quality improvement which was clearly associated to an increase of audits and evaluations in the area of teaching while the area of research was governed by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

In Germany the emergence of HEPROs can be traced to increased responsibilities and institutional decision-making powers granted to the universities by the states. Despite considerable differences in the leeway institutional leadership was granted by the 16 state laws governing higher education institutions after the reform of federalism in 2006, new forms of managerial governance based on instruments of New Public Management approaches took hold. These changes led to the emergence of a number of professional roles for HEPROs supporting the institutional management in their decision-making. Another area are the changes related to the implementation of the Bologna reforms. Here we find new roles pertaining to curriculum change, accreditation, study counselling, etc.

Overall we can say that professional roles for HEPROs emerge at first in an incremental and ad hoc form because of changed or increased external challenges and requirements. The more progressed and established managerial governance approaches become in institutional leadership, the more strategic and planned are roles for HEPROs. As Kottmann and Enders (2013) pointed out, HEPROs are driving forces in the transformation of unclear technologies into objective knowledge. Therefore, it is important that they possess both knowledge about academic work processes which are notorious for their unclear technologies and administrative and managerial know-how in order to develop appropriate steering and control mechanisms. Whitchurch's (2008b) concept of third space professionals can thus be described in more detail: HEPROs take over tasks that formerly belonged to the traditional portfolio of academic staff and these tasks become new positions within the institutions. And HEPROs take over new tasks created by external challenges and requirements which are neither clearly linked to the administration nor to the academic sphere.

In the four countries included in this comparison we find three groups of HEPROs: those supporting students, those supporting academic staff, and those supporting institutional management. And while the support of students and academic staff mainly serves quality and efficiency gains, the support of institutional management has a stronger emphasis on shaping and conceptualising.

6.3.3 The Influence of HEPROs on Academic Work

Much of the existing body of literature assumes that the emergence of HEPROs also entails a de-professionalisation of the academic profession and that this leads to conflicts. Interestingly this is not the case generally. The country comparisons have shown that the group of HEPROs supporting students (advice, counselling, pastoral care, career services, etc.) does not have much contact with the academic staff and their work is rather highly appreciated because it takes part of the burden of advice and support for students off the back of academics.

The group of HEPROs dealing with the organisation of teaching is much closer related to the work tasks of academic staff insofar as they tend to aim towards varying degrees of standardisation, innovation, optimisation, efficiency gains, and controlling. In this area one would expect more potential for conflict, however, the higher level of complexity which has been created for curriculum change and study programme organisation as well as the changes in approaches to teaching (e.g. student centred, based on learning outcomes) have led to academics' appreciation for support and advice in this respect. Certainly, here and there conflicts might arise but the organisation of teaching is mostly seen as a rather administrative and bureaucratic issue by most academics and thus, the work of HEPROs tends to unburden academic staff in this respect. Furthermore, in Austria we find the example that HEPRO roles did not really emerge in this particular area but it is kept as part of the portfolio of academic staff.

The third group of HEPROs supporting institutional management is also distanced to some extent from the core business of teaching and research but here more conflicts between HEPROs and the academic profession have been observed than in the other two groups. This is mainly due to the fact that the academic profession tends to see HEPROs supporting the institutional management as part the bureaucratic and control mechanisms which they want to reduce in the name of academic freedom. As far as quality assurance and quality management processes are concerned the academic profession tends this area of HEPRO activity as providing opportunities for HEPROs to gain influence on the core business of teaching.

Thus, HEPROs work as experts providing services for different internal stakeholder groups, and they carry out internal as well as external bridging functions. Frequently their work is highly appreciated by academic staff as long as it has facilitative functions and is based on shared goals. However, we also found a number of cases in different countries where academic staff feel that they are increasingly working for the HEPROs than the other way round, for example by having to collect new or additional data, being pushed to engage in external activities or having to support the university in public events. Conflicts arise in particular when HEPROs create additional paperwork for the academics or when an additional layer of bureaucratisation emerges. In some forms of institutional research this seems to be the case. Those HEPROs who support the institutional management are either not perceived by academic staff at all or their work is regarded as rather intransparent. Thus, our analyses indicate that the work of

HEPROs creates new configurations of power within the institutions which have to be analysed in more detail in the future.

6.4 Conclusions

There is a considerable multitude of HEPROs who share a few commonalities though. They come from different disciplines but have an academic background, i.e. a university degree, often a PhD. They provide multiple services in form of mostly advisory and managerial tasks. Equally heterogeneous as their job tasks are their functions and positions within the structure of higher education institutions but less so their conditions of contract. Required core competences are dominantly a capability for independent work, communication skills, and the ability to cooperate with various status groups. Teaching and research might be part of their job to some extent but most HEPROs do not see themselves as part of the academic profession.

HEPROs tend to be experts of their respective higher education system and are deeply familiar with the core functions of higher education institutions (Klumpff and Teichler 2008, p. 170; see also Kehm et al. 2008). As experts they undergo an increasing professionalization which cannot, however, be characterised as a profession according to sociological understanding. In the sociology of professions professionalization is characterised as a process including the following elements:

- scientification and academization of the knowledge base,
- determination of professional titles,
- establishment of an exclusive professional organisation,
- commitment to a professional ethos,
- state sanctioned self-governance of the profession,
- monopolisation of access to the profession through members of the profession (Nullmeier 2001, 363).

However, we do observe increasing requirements with respect to their formal qualifications and training, an upgrading of their status, the emergence of a shared cognitive basis, and the formation of networks and a common identity (cf. Gornitzka and Marheim Larsen 2004, p. 463).

Referring to older publications, Dobson and Conway (2003, p. 127) conclude that higher education professionals are required to base their work on academic values rather than operating in a bureaucratic or administrative way. Basically the relationship between academic staff and higher education professionals tends to be an increasingly interesting and still open question: “The growing power of non-academic administrators raises the question whether they develop functions and values which are separable from those of the heads of institutions and other academic decision-makers whose work they service” (Becher and Kogan 1992, p. 179). This opens up the field for research on identity and its links to the changing functions and roles of academic staff on the one hand and higher education professionals on the other. There are some indications that a shift from pure to hybrid

forms of professionalism and mixed control is currently happening (cf. Noordegraaf 2007). Middlehurst (2010) has already challenged the notion of the identity of academic staff and higher education professionals as two worlds apart in an explorative essay introducing the universal higher education professional. If this hypothesis can be empirically verified it might lead to numerous new research questions concerning changes in the ways professionalization is happening in higher education institutions.

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