



Original Article

Legitimacy Dynamics of Professional Support Staff at Higher Education Institutions

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The aim of this study is to identify the expressions of legitimacy work available to professional support staff at contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) and how these expressions can be understood as strategies in their work. Academics are the given audience for this legitimacy work. Professional support staff are commonly described as having blurred boundaries in relation to academics and as actors in a third space. The empirical data comprise 19 interviews with three categories of professional support staff at three HEIs of a technical orientation in Sweden. A finding, in relation to the educational and work experience of these support staff, is that techniques and procedures are at their fingertips in legitimacy work. This also touches upon the more intangible aspects of the categories and structures of the support staff that resemble those of academics. However, one of the main conclusions of this study concerns the strength of the expressions of *professional and personal legitimacy* in their legitimacy work. This conclusion coincides with the view that they are strong actors in a third space, who use their freedom to form their own roles and the pick and choose among alternative means in their strategies to gain and maintain legitimacy.

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Introduction

At the heart of any organisation is a division of labour between different roles. The crude division at higher education institutions (HEIs) is between academic positions and the professional support staff. This is a division that in the literature constitutes a scenario with tensions (Brown *et al.*, 2018; Rytberg and Geschwind, 2017; Whitchurch, 2007). In this study, these tensions are studied as an issue of legitimacy from the perspective of the professional support staff. Legitimacy work is a matter of acquiring legitimacy, but just as much about maintaining this legitimacy.

In research, the designation ‘professional support staff’ is used to describe individuals in support roles who are commonly highly qualified and have an academic degree. They do not necessarily identify as administrators, nor are they employed as academics. They are situated somewhere in between. According to this research, they may also be viewed as actors in a third space. This is a concept used when exploring groups of staff at HEIs who do not fit the conventional binary descriptors of ‘academics’ or ‘non-academics’ (Kallenberg, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008, 2015). In the case of this study, the targeted support staff are represented by staff with roles to support business liaison, internationalisation and research at HEIs. They all have rather strategic roles close to the leadership of their HEIs. One assumption is that this may imply some security in their roles and that the mission goals of their HEIs guide their work.

In earlier research, two different perspectives on the tensions between academics and professional support staff have come to the fore, reflecting the perspectives of each role. In this literature, for academics, professional support staff may be regarded as a potential threat, both in terms of their increased share of higher education degrees and their proximity to the management of the HEI (Kehm, 2015; Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2013). Together with the current steering influences of managerialism and New Public Management (Hood, 1991), as well as external expectations of HEIs’ role in and contribution to society (Geschwind *et al.*, 2019), this has been described by some scholars as trespassing into the territory of academics. These tensions may partly be explained as a consequence of the highly institutionalised setting of academic values and norms at contemporary HEIs (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Kehm, 2015; Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). A further explanation is the effect of increasingly neoliberal views on how to run HEIs (Broucker *et al.*, 2017). According to some scholars, one consequence has been that power within HEIs has shifted from the collegial structures of academics to managers (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016), of which the professional support staff may be representative.

From the perspective of the professional support staff, the tensions with academics have been described as a lack of acknowledgement and status for the different types of knowledge that these support staff represent (Botterill, 2018; Coaldrake, 2000; McInnis, 1998; Whitchurch, 2008), and they feel undervalued. The academic discourse belittles their roles in carrying out the university’s missions (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004). According to this literature, support staff have perceived themselves to be an invisible category of staff who are not conceptualised as being part of the intellectual capital of the HEI by academics (Kehm, 2006; McInnis, 1998; Rhoades, 2012; Szekeres, 2004, 2011).

Even though the academic profession is more internationalised than most professions are, in most countries the debate on the impact of management and thus the roles of professional support staff refers to the national context. If the work jurisdiction of academics changes, it will affect the emerging work jurisdiction of



the professional support staff (Schneijderberg, 2015; Teichler and Cummings, 2015). There may thus be national differences in the relation between academics and support staff. The national context of this study is Sweden.

Related to the third space features of many professional support staff roles is the interdependence of identity construction and legitimacy in a role (Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2019). In establishing a professional identity, the recognition of the role, legitimacy of the role and trust are critical elements. These also represent the extent of boundary permeability between roles within organised entities such as universities (Padró, 2018). In this study, this is an opening for the exploration of the expressions of legitimacy available to the professional support staff at contemporary HEIs and how these expressions might be understood. Professional support staff's legitimacy work is approached by unpacking and mapping how staff with roles to support business liaison, internationalisation and research describe the way they work in relation to academics. Much previous research on professional support staff has focussed on Academic Developers or Educational Technologists (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2018; Graham, 2013; Linqvist, 2017). This study is thus an extension of research examining how different professional support staff categories perceive their roles at contemporary HEIs. Furthermore, it adds to our understanding of legitimacy work for occupational roles with unclear boundaries in relation to other roles in an organisation.

It is obvious from the literature on professional support staff that they are far from a homogeneous category. They comprise a rather broad palette of specialised individuals. However, a distinction might be made between purely administrative tasks and sector-specific tasks. The former includes, for example, human resources, finance and control, marketing and communication, and legal affairs. The latter may include different types of research or educational support. Furthermore, many roles are explicable as a result of the broadened role of contemporary HEIs, which has affected both the roles of professional support staff and of academics (Bossu *et al.*, 2018; Kallenberg, 2016; Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2013).

The professional support staff categories in this study are chosen as examples of roles that might be viewed as new or changed. Beyond the external expectations of HEIs and the transformed steering ideologies, there is also a newness to their roles in terms of their levels of educational background. Furthermore, previous research shows that they have, to a great extent, designed their roles themselves and thus have quite some discretion with regard to them (Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017). Professional support staff employed in these units often play a dual role. They transmit and translate environment demands into their HEIs, but also represent concerns to institutional agents (Scott, 2001, 187) such as the management of the HEIs.

Together, these entangled pre-conditions provide the setting for the legitimacy work of professional support staff in the roles of supporting business liaison, internationalisation and research at HEIs. The research questions in this study are



as follows: What expressions of legitimacy work are there for professional support staff at contemporary HEIs and how can these expressions be understood as strategies in their work?

Moral Legitimacy — A Strategy for Professional Support Staff?

The importance of legitimacy becomes immediately and painfully apparent only if lost. This suggests that it is not a specific resource, but a fundamental condition of social existence (Scott, 2013). Sources of legitimacy are the internal and external audiences who observe the organisations in focus. In the case of this study, academics constitute the audience. Consequently, they are also the assessors of the legitimacy work of the professional support staff (Ruef and Scott, 1998). Thus, to use a game analogy to the historic HEI setting, the academic values and norms constitute the rules of the game, the institution, while the professional support staff as an organisation are the players of the game (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016; Scott, 2001).

Obviously, professional support staff roles are not about a single actor, but a variety of roles and functions distributed across diverse players in the highly normative and mature HEI setting (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002). This is a setting in which new ideas may have to be justified by aligning them with prescribed academic values (Lawrence, 1999). The legitimacy of the professional support staff would, in the words of Meyer and Rowan (1977), be a matter of their social fitness in relation to the array of cultural accounts that might be in play at contemporary HEIs. With reference to Scott (1983), we might ask: To what extent do these accounts provide explanations for their existence, functions, jurisdiction and lack of alternatives?

Legitimacy is a multifaceted concept, with a character which implies that it will operate differently in different contexts, and how it works may depend on the nature of the problems for which it is the purported solution (Suchman, 1995). If the professional support staff fail to execute the purpose assigned to them, there is an opening for performance challenges against them (Hirsch and Andrews, 1986) and, thus, fuel for tension. The legitimacy aspects of the professional support staff outlined above could thus be summed up in the broad-based definition of legitimacy by Suchman (1995):

Legitimacy is a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995, 574).

Three expressions of broad and entangled types of legitimacy can be discerned: *pragmatic*, *moral* and *cognitive* (Suchman, 1995). *Cognitive legitimacy* applies

where there is an acceptance of the professional support staff's work as necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account. This signals a rather mature and institutionalised relationship. Based on the literature on the relations between professional support staff and academics, this type of legitimacy is not the most feasible. *Pragmatic legitimacy* boils down to a sort of exchange of legitimacy-support; i.e. does the work of the professional support staff meet the expected value for the academics? There would thus be a general consent from the academics about the given support. This type of legitimacy requires that the expectations of the academic audience are clearly expressed and that the feedback from them is tangible. The latter cannot be taken as given (Rytberg and Geschwind, 2017).

In this study, the hypothesis is that much of the professional support staff's legitimacy work fits under the canopy of *moral legitimacy* judgements. These are beliefs about whether the activity/support effectively promotes societal welfare, as defined by the audience's socially constructed value system (Suchman, 1995).

These moral legitimacy judgements generally take one of four forms, where the academics, as the audience, perform the following:

- *Evaluation of outputs and consequences.* The professional support staff are judged by what they accomplish.
- *Evaluations of techniques and procedures.* The professional support staff garner moral legitimacy by embracing socially accepted methods. Such procedural legitimacy becomes most significant in the absence of clear outcome measures.
- *Evaluation of categories and structures.* Academics value the professional support staff because they are categorised and structured in a way that is familiar to and in line with the taxonomy of academic environments. One such structure might arise where the support staff have Ph.D.s and thus some research experience.
- *Evaluation of personal legitimacy.* This is where personal features of the professional support staff are central to the legitimacy work. Professional support staff might refer to personal characteristics, such as their educational or work experience. This type of evaluation tends to be relatively transitory, idiosyncratic and low in objectification. It corresponds to the Weberian ideal-type of charismatic authority (Weber, 1978).

Legitimacy building is generally a proactive enterprise, because actors have advance knowledge of their plans and of the need for legitimation. Roughly, legitimacy-building strategies fall into *three clusters* (Suchman, 1995):

- (a) efforts to conform to the dictates of pre-existing audiences, i.e. academics, within the organisation's current environment (pragmatic),



- (b) efforts to select among multiple environments in pursuit of an audience that will support current practices, and
- (c) efforts to manipulate the environmental structure by creating new audiences and new legitimating beliefs. This also implies viewing the gaining of legitimacy from a strategic perspective, whereby legitimacy is managed to help achieve organisational goals (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008).

With the aim of exploring expressions of legitimacy work by the professional support staff at contemporary HEIs and how these expressions might be understood in terms of the above strategies, the four forms of moral legitimacy judgements are transformed into alternative approaches for the professional support staff in their legitimacy work. The analytical lens for the study is thus a mapping of the ways in which the three categories of professional support staff in their legitimacy work relate to *outputs and consequences*, *technique and procedures*, *categories and structures* and *means for professional and personal legitimacy* within the larger legitimacy type. In this study, ‘professional’ is added to the ‘personal legitimacy’ form because the combination of educational background, previous work experience and freedom of the support staff to design their roles may also be interpreted as personal features.

Methodology

Legitimacy is essentially relationally constructed and emerges out of a subject’s cultural alignment and normative support with rules and laws (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Scott, 2001). Some of these relations may be concrete and visible, while others might have a more tacit and even subconscious character. As noted above, the three categories of professional support staff examined in this study might be viewed as representatives of the third space or of a space in between traditional administrative roles and academic positions (Kallenberg, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008). These features of the professional support staff make their legitimacy work interesting to explore.

This is a thematic qualitative and interpretative study (Braun and Clarke, 2006), based on semi-structured interviews with 19 professional support staff working to support business liaison (5), internationalisation (5) and research (9) at three different HEIs of a technical orientation in Sweden. These three categories of support staff constituted a purposive and theoretical sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Marshall and Rossman, 2014) in that they were chosen as examples of professional support roles that are new or that have changed at the HEIs (Karlsson and Ryttberg, 2016; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017).

The aim was to interpret the data in order to bring meaning and insights to the relational acts of the participants (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). One of the themes



in the interview guide concerned the relations between the professional support staff and academics, the leadership of the HEI and other categories of support staff. The main data for this study, however, concerned the relations with the academics as an audience for the professional support staff and how this affected their work.

The interviews took place at three universities with a technical orientation in autumn 2015. Participants were chosen by a combination of searches on the web pages of the universities and suggestions from management at the HEIs. The interviews were conducted together by the principal investigator with a research colleague; we took turns to interview and take notes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, after which they were coded and analysed using qualitative data software.

The interpretative analysis of the interview data for this study was guided by an analytical lens with theory-generated codes derived from a review of the literature on legitimacy work (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Marshall and Rossman, 2014; Suchman, 1995). The analysis started with a read-through of the answers to the specific questions on the professional support staff's work relations with academics. Sub-questions concerned, for example, how frequently they worked with academics, how this collaboration functioned and what methods the participants used in their support. Other questions concerned the division of labour between themselves and academics and how academics perceived the role of the support staff. These answers were roughly coded to allow for nuances in relation to the analytical lens. As these questions were derived from a broad interview guide consisting of several themes, the next step was a read-through of all of the interviews. Relational issues came up in different ways throughout the interviews and thus were also coded. In a second round of coding, the aim was to tighten the interpretations of the legitimacy work in line with the analytical lens. The four expressions of moral legitimacy work constituted the main themes, while also keeping the door open for pragmatic and cognitive expressions.

Results¹

The expressions of legitimacy work of the professional support staff that came to the fore in the findings from this study can be viewed from two quite different perspectives. On the one hand, there are the concrete work activities that the professional support staff view as a desirable and appropriate support for the academics. On the other hand, there are also more symbolic aspects that they highlighted as central to the way they approached their support for the academics. In common to both these perspectives are issues of judgement about the outputs and consequences of their work.



Techniques and Procedures

Techniques and procedures constituted one of the four forms of legitimacy work that the professional support staff highlighted as desirable and appropriate forms of support for the academics. Examples of concrete support were *methods, templates, routines, reporting, activity planning, meetings* and *protocols*. Another was support for academics in *practising interviews* as a preparation for applications to research projects. These are all examples of pre-defined toolboxes that the participants have brought into their roles.

Another example of concrete support deemed to be desirable was support in the construction of different kinds of agreement with industry, research funders or student exchanges with HEIs abroad. In the latter case, one participant said that ‘...the internationalisation work took place in isolated nodes all over the HEI. My role was to connect these nodes into a coherent strategy to give the management support in their strategies’ (participant I-2). When these strategies and templates for agreements came into being, management began to refer to the professional support staff when getting questions from academics.

One common expression of support that was judged as proper and appropriate was characterised by different kinds of advisory services or counselling. It could come down to answering simple questions about addresses or templates for applications for research grants. However, it could also imply the role of sounding board in developing a research idea together with a researcher: ‘We try to work with ideas that the researchers bring to us.... We make sure that relevant people can give input on the idea, arrange workshops and so on...’ (participant F-8). Another participant described how they asked a researcher: ‘Can we borrow your idea for three months?... we will test the idea on the market and after 3 months come back to [the research] with our analysis presented in a report’ (participant BL-5).

One technique described involved two support staff together reviewing a research application from a researcher before it was submitted: ‘We screen the application from our perspective, [we don’t have] research eyes, but we have seen many applications and thus know ... if we can’t understand and find the line of argument ... then others will not either’ (participant F-2). However, several participants highlighted that this was intended to suggest improvements, being careful not to get criticised for being hard on following protocol too closely. The method also had to be constantly developed. The advisory role in handling research applications thus involved dialogue, reading and writing.

No matter the specialisations and strengths of the different support staff, one challenge expressed by many of the participants was coming close enough to the academics to offer their support. In order to cross the threshold to academic environments, the participants used dialogue, communication and a great dose of sensitivity to academic norms and values. This is explained by one informant thus: ‘... many [academics] have a slightly aggressive view of everything that comes



from the administrative support, an inherent scepticism ... It can be quite energy demanding to cross this threshold ...' (participant I-4). What emerged from the interviews, however, was that academics were often surprised at how much support there was available. Nonetheless, the professional support staff had to start by proving that they could contribute in various ways. One participant explained the situation thus: 'We have gone from being rather reactive in our work — what do the regulations say and how many pages are allowed — to today's work, which is more proactive. We meet faculty to inform or to arrange thematic workshops, depending on what we consider our HEI needs to work on' (participant F-4).

There are numerous examples in the interviews in which the professional support staff highlight dialogues and meetings as a multifaceted way of building a relationship with academics and getting things done. A strategy is: '...to try to participate in as many meetings as one can and meet as many people as possible to learn the local discourse' (participant BL-1). Examples of these dialogues are workshops or information events with academics. Sensibility and the ability to see the whole are crucial skills. A concrete example by a participant was that: 'a research project is often very detailed in its description ... but to finance it you need to understand the broad context for what potential results there may be from the project ... this is where the professional support staff may have a role' (participant F-2). This participant describes the ultimate goal as being to provide seamless support whereby the questions of the researchers are already answered.

Another of the more intangible tasks of the professional support staff that might enhance their legitimacy is their role as a bridge for academics in relation to the management. A participant expressed it as: 'We can raise [academics'] issues with management, which might not be achievable otherwise' (participant F-2). The intangibility of this task is partly embedded in how the participants describe their work in terms of coordination, project leading and process managing, which could be applied on many different tasks. One participant explained the task thus: 'Much of the work is about coordinating, trying to tie things together, to construct a smooth process that isn't held up by something missing' (participant I-2). Participants highlighted their experience as process leaders as an example of a quality contribution insofar as they are able to break up silos in the HEI organisation.

In summary, both concrete work methods and dialogues in this study come to the fore as techniques and procedures that the professional support staff have judged to be desirable and appropriate in their legitimacy work in relation to the academics.

Professional and Personal — a Pick and Choose Approach

Legitimacy that emanates from the professional and personal features of the professional staff was also commonly expressed when the participants in the study



described their legitimacy work. The professional and personal aspects included a combination of their educational background and work experience and the fact that they were employed as specialists within a specific area at their HEI. In addition, these qualities came with a certain seniority. It was also evident here that the freedom of the professional support staff to design their roles came into play thus: 'It has been very much in my hands to determine which activities to use to enthuse academics about the support they received' (participant F-4).

This freedom is partly manifested in the titles of the participants in this study. They present themselves as project leaders, coordinators, strategists and process leaders. Although they work within different fields, their titles leave room for a reasonably wide range of work tasks. The titles in themselves also convey the idea of a job in which the development of methods for work is central. The space to choose how to organise work is further manifested by one participant who said '... my goal isn't to administrate by the book. My goal is to get [the researchers] started. This means that if there are obstacles, I will remove them by changing my tactics ...' (participant F-8).

A number of the participants said that the combination of previous work experience and age might be important aspects in managing the relations with academics: '... I believe I can manage my work because I'm not 20 anymore, I have been working in several related organisations and brought competence.[...] I know my strengths and how to express my thoughts [about work issues]... one gets known among the researchers' (participant F-2). Another key characteristic highlighted by several participants was the possession of a doctorate and thus some research experience which one of them described as: '...a tacit identity aspect in my work all the time, implying that I understand you [the academic] and your pre-conditions. It should be added that I have been around quite a while, I am rather senior in the administration and my network with researchers is immense' (participant F-7). Another participant highlighted the value of a Ph.D., saying: 'I don't have a background in the subject, but I do have the Ph.D. training and long experience in supporting things, of quickly grasping what needs to be done and getting things going ... and staying distant enough to complement and contribute' (participant BL-1).

Being a trained engineer and having worked in the industry sector also came to the fore as tacit but potential legitimisers according to many participants in the study. Nonetheless, there was quite a bit of work done to '... create space and make room for the questions one feels are important and to find constituents' (participant I-4).

Another theme in the findings was that the professional support staff described their work as a complement to the work and the perspectives of academics: 'I believe it's good to have kind of another perspective when you work with faculty in niched academic fields. [My job is] to find out how to complement [them] with my competence' (participant BL-1). By identifying how to complement the academics

and be sensitive to what they actually need, the same participant (BL-1) says ‘I believe there is potential for mutual respect [between the support staff and the academics]’.

In summary, the professional and personal features of the professional support staff were highlighted as important for their relations with the academics. Their educational background and their experience, together with the roles they had designed for themselves, gave them room to pick and choose how to approach the academics.

Outputs and Consequences

Another expression of the legitimacy work of the professional support staff lay in their ability to show the outputs and consequences of their work. This was also a frequently cited topic for the professional support staff in this study. They wanted to prove that they had contributed to outputs by supporting the academics. However, the interviews highlighted the challenges they often perceived in their work because it was integrated into the work of the academics and often over the long term, meaning that it was hard to measure.

Comments in relation to the outputs and consequences of their work included this observation: ‘We have a lot of discussions about how to measure [specific] tasks. However, first we have to figure out why we should measure them and in relation to what objectives’ (participant BL-4). Another statement along the same lines was made by another participant: ‘We try to be pragmatic when we learn about our areas of responsibility and outputs without spending whole days assessing our work’ (participant F-4). Ultimately, one participant said, ‘people will take note that there will be action when I have listened. This is so important, to show that you contribute to change’ (participant F-7).

One message from the interviews, on the output theme, was that ‘the researchers sometimes are happy just to receive simple support. To them, an application to a new funding agency might feel like an insuperable task, whereas [the support] can quickly sort out how it should be handled’ (participant F-2). The willingness to measure the support staff’s contribution to the HEI was manifested by one participant: ‘At least I believe that I can defend my area of responsibility. If I couldn’t, I would have worked with something else. I want to be able to show how we contribute ... however, it is not always that easy to measure in clear numbers ... measuring incoming grants might be easy, but measuring how the support has contributed to this grant is something completely different’ (participant F-9). In this context, the fact that the support staff in this study all work close to the management also implies that their strategic work does have some impact: ‘But it is hard to determine which is the hen and which is the egg. For a 15 million kronor grant [that my HEI] received, I wrote half a page out of a total of ten. It is hard to say what my contribution was ...’ (participant F-5).

Key to academics' satisfaction with the support they receive is an insight into and understanding of what the support staff do and how it contributes to academic business. Proof of such contributions might be when a workshop or information session renders many questions or when a decision is made with regard to an exchange programme, because: 'The recruitment of students and scholarships are concrete outputs in the eyes of academics' (participant I-2).

However, some findings indicate that this is an assessment of ambiguous value. One informant expressed it thus: 'We [the support staff] have talked internally about the idea that there are good and evil support staff. The good ones are those who are perceived as contributing to the researchers by, for example, advising on EU issues ... for other tasks, such as follow-up surveys, referrals that must be answered [by academics] and where the HEI isn't necessarily in command ... the responsible support staff might then be labelled "evil"' (participant F-9). Another participant said that '... when I meet researchers, I ask, "What's your experience of the support? Did you get the help you needed?" And I believe that I always get an answer on this question ...' (participant F-4).

There is a general consensus among the participants that their work should be measured. However, there is also a consensus that: 'We should measure the [long-term] effect objectives; we can't use [short-term] result measuring. We can't measure volumes. It is the effects that are important. And those can be intangible' (participant BL-4).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore expressions of legitimacy work for the professional support staff at contemporary HEIs and how these expressions could be understood in terms of alternative legitimacy strategies: to conform, to search for an audience or to manipulate and thus actively influence the strategic work of the HEIs. The analytical lens for the study has been a mapping of how the three categories of professional support staff relate to *outputs and consequences*, *technique and procedures*, *categories and structures* and means for *professional and personal legitimacy* in their legitimacy work.

One conclusion from this study is that major expressions of the legitimacy work of the targeted professional support staff fall within the form of *techniques and procedures*. Such support is identified as both desirable and appropriate by the academics. In many cases, the support staff are trained to work with systems and organising actors around a project that might result in more or less tangible artefacts.

A second conclusion is that the legitimacy work by the professional support staff, can be facilitated by their educational background, work experience and level of seniority. As the support staff see things, these aspects may be valued by



academics both for their knowledge content and for more symbolic reasons, such as having worked in industry or being a trained engineer. Furthermore, if the support person has a Ph.D., this can have both a practical and a symbolic value. In the latter case, this touches upon the *categories and structures* type of moral legitimacy. A Ph.D. is to academics a recognised qualification category and structure and might thus function as a legitimiser leading to desirability and trust in relation to the services of the support staff. The use of techniques and procedures in the legitimacy work thus combines the profiles of the professional support staff, their freedom to design their roles and what they have perceived as a desirable and appropriate support.

Much of the technique and procedural work is about dialogues and counselling. This work is obviously difficult to assess in terms of *outputs and consequences*. Several findings highlight an awareness of this issue, as well as of the ongoing work to capture the results of support given in the areas of business liaison, internationalisation and research. In all these areas, much of the work is long term and when an agreement finally is signed, for example, between the HEI and an external stakeholder, it can be very challenging to determine the contribution from the professional support staff (Karlsson and Rytberg, 2016; Rytberg and Geschwind, 2019).

A major conclusion from this study is how evident expressions of *professional and personal legitimacy* are as a means in the legitimacy work of the professional support staff targeted in this study. This conclusion is in line with previous literature that points to some professional support staff as actors in a third space with blurred boundaries, both in relation to purely administrative roles and to academics. They are strong individuals who use their freedom to form their own roles and to pick and choose among alternative methods. Previous studies indicate that this is also a key driver among such staff for their decision to choose their role. Another key, central to the professional support staff's handling of potential issues of tension, is their knowledge and understanding of the essence of academic work (Rytberg and Geschwind, 2017). However, this freedom might also have a down side. The professional and personal dependence of the legitimacy imply that the relationship between the academics and the support staff might be fragile, relatively transitory and idiosyncratic (Suchman, 1995).

In line with the academic setting of HEIs, a further conclusion from this study is that the professional support staff are fully aware that their legitimacy has to start with a strategy that conforms to the prevalent norms and values that rule in academic communities in HEIs. Once there is a workable relationship with the academics, there might be openings for a more strategic approach in which environmental structures can be actively impinged upon in order to help achieve organisational objectives (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). However, to reach such a state, the professional support staff have to show sensitivity, knowledge and



understanding in relation to what it is that the academics desire and what they find proper and appropriate.

This study shows examples of the dynamics of legitimacy in the roles of professional support staff at contemporary HEIs. Legitimacy is a precondition for support staff's ability to shape their identity and enhance their status in co-existence with academic staff (Bossu *et al.*, 2018). Their legitimacy work is a matter of acquiring legitimacy, but just as much about maintaining this legitimacy in a context in which academic values and norms rule, but which is also under pressure from changes both in the surrounding society and in the internal governance of HEIs. This study is based on three different categories of professional support staff that have their strategic roles in common. The many different roles that support staff at HEIs have are an invitation to conduct more studies on the theme of legitimacy.

Note

¹The interviews are numbered for transparency in the following way: I/BL/R refers to the three different categories of professional support staff in this study (I: internationalisation; BL: business liaison; R: research). The number after the hyphen refers to the informants in the respective category of professional support staff.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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