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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Blurring Boundaries and Changing University Staff: The Case of the University of Hong Kong

Abstract In the changing higher education environment, universities increasingly engage in areas outside the traditional teaching and research missions. The new missions extend over wide yet specialized areas, such as technological advancement, internationalization, entrepreneurship, and enhancement of teaching and learning. To effectively handle these areas, universities require specific talents that may not be found in conventional academic and administrative cadres. The transformation highlights blurred boundaries between academic and non-academic spheres of the university. Situated in the University of Hong Kong (HKU), this paper explores how the university utilizes new professionals and administrative staff in new missions. Qualitative interviews with university staff reveal their profiles and perceptions in evolving organizational structures. By examining understudied subjects in Hong Kong, it discusses implications of changing university staff and how universities may optimize their new talent.

Keywords university administration, Hong Kong, professional staff

Introduction

In the changing higher education environment, it is essential for universities to engage in new missions other than teaching and research. The list includes but is not limited to internationalization, technological advancement, corporate and public partnership, extensive legal and financial affairs, student support and creation of a learning-centered environment. In order to better handle these new areas of professional and academic work, enhancement of human resource

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practice has become a key strategy, along with organizational changes and strengthening managerial structures (Middlehurst, 2013; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013). As a consequence, university staff with professional competencies and higher academic qualifications have become core personnel for such new missions (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). Traditionally, academics managed these areas as part of wider roles expected of them in university management. However, a corporate mode of management, decreasing public funding, and intensified competition has fostered a new environment and division of labor (Whitchurch, 2006). Academic roles have added pressures due to an increasing demand for research output and workload while managerialism further emphasizes the role of administrative operations. Moreover, administration of new university missions has become highly specialized and complex, requiring new types of expertise (Rogers & Schofield, 2013).

Changing organizational structures and balance between academics and the administration have visible impacts. As the significance of professional expertise in university management increases, it is crucial to understand better who they are and how they are positioned. Successful organization of academic and various kinds of "non-academic" talent based on a shared commitment may contribute significantly to enhancement of institutional strength in the current competitive environment. It can support academic and educational work through an effective division of labor or a new form of productive alliance (Oba, 2008). Research on this topic is needed to develop a framework for "a new internal culture that is based on an organizational synthesis" (Marginson, 2000, p. 34) among diverse university staff today.

The purpose of this research is to study administrative and professional staff working in new university missions in the University of Hong Kong (HKU). Through qualitative interviews, it explores three main factors: (1) The ways HKU utilizes new talents for specialized and diverse projects; (2) the perceptions of university staff working in new missions; and (3) the spaces in which academic and administrative spheres interact. Whilst no previous study has been found on this topic in Hong Kong, a study in this context may provide useful insights from its unique educational system, recent reforms that increasingly require specialized expertise, and sociocultural factors that mold the phenomena in particular ways.

Literature Review

A growing number of studies have been done on changing university staff in higher education institutions. In the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and several other European countries, researchers explore dynamics of new university missions and changing non-academic staff, often focusing on their relationship to academic staff (e.g., McInnis, 1998; Gornall, 1999; Berman & Pitman, 2010; Shelley, 2010; Krücken, Blümel, & Kloke, 2013). The significance of these shifts has also been recognized in policy dimensions. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the 1997 government-commissioned Dearing Report referred to the growing significance of professional development, while distinguishing between academic, professional, and administrative staff.

As the changes may hinder traditional academic governance, tensions arise between distinctive cadres of university workers. One of the main foci of research has been to recognize the new talents and to analyze how they may effectively function within higher education institutions (Marginson, 2000; Rogers & Schofield, 2013). Whitchurch (2008, 2013) conceptualizes the emergence of new professionals as a blurring of various traditional boundaries. For example, blended professionals would work in new projects that are outside of traditional administrative and academic borders. Blended professionals play highly knowledge-based roles, sometimes including research and consulting. Although they work as non-professoriate staff, they may have similar academic qualifications as professoriate staff. Under these organizational changes, the traditional academic/non-academic distinction may be becoming obsolete; furthermore, they may develop new identities attached to their unique positions in the new projects.

Yet, there are varied discussions concerning how prevalent the trend is. Dobson and Conway (2003) emphasize the fact that identity changes and blurring boundaries may apply to new professionals who engage in areas such as learning support and IT but not necessarily to the entire administrative cadre. Altbach (2001) argues that the situation may vary between types of institutions in the United States. Schools with prestige and tradition may retain more " 'faculty power' than schools lower in the hierarchy" (p. 25). Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) report several pieces of evidence that indicate professionalization of administrative staff. For example, these include a higher academic requirement

for employment of university administrators, increasing professional networks of university administrators, and the creation of specialized positions opposed to generalist ones. At the same time, boundaries may be still rigid because academic production remains solely in the control of academic staff. Administrative roles may still be procedural and underrecognized though they are indispensable to university governance.

Although it remains an understudied topic in Asia, an accumulation of research has been observed. Oba (2008) studies blurred boundaries in academic support centers at Japanese national universities, where professional staff are employed to take on specialized services like counseling, career development, and industry partnerships. Importantly, they are often employed with academic ranks, such as professor and assistant professor, although their functions are different from professoriate staff. This is partly because of the notion that an academic rank would be a necessary condition to work on the same ground with professoriate staff (pp. 81–82). Ye and Wong (2009) point out a similar development of specialized centers in universities on the Chinese mainland, especially career support services. In response to the recent development of the higher education sector, the Ministry of Education has organized skill development workshops for university managers. However, they point out that the concept and values of professionalization are still underrecognized. Practices of lifetime employment and informal hiring are a few factors that prevent improvement in this area. In an analysis of Korean cases by Jung and Shin (2014), administrative positions at public universities are structured within the larger civil servant employment system, in which university staff are hired through a general exam and rotated among other public organizations. Administrative works are perceived as bureaucratic and unspecialized, which may hinder development of a professional workforce and demotivate those with advanced skillsets.

In Hong Kong, no major study about university administrative staff has been published. Yet, recent changes in the higher education sector suggest possibilities of similar shifts in this context. Recent higher education reforms have supported projects such as entrepreneurship, internationalization, industrial linkages, and commercialization. As limited government funding leads institutions to seek efficient operation and entrepreneurial activities, a number of studies point out shifts in academic environment and university management practice (e.g., Mok & Lee, 2000; Wan, 2011). Especially, Mok and Nelson (2013) observe a surge of

managerialism and a decrease in academic governance while expanding mid-level administrators who "have come to exercise more authority, often wielding powers voluntarily delegated (some would say abdicated) by academics who face increasing expectations for research" (p. 2). Being preconditions toward stronger administrative control (Marginson, 2000), these pieces of evidence suggest a similar trend in Hong Kong universities.

Higher Education Reforms in Hong Kong

In order to identify areas of new university missions and their growing significance in Hong Kong, a constructive step would be to situate institutions in their wider policy context. In the context of New Public Management, the state increasingly steers universities through deregulatory measures and presses for the enhancement of institutional operation (Meek, Goedegebuure, Santiago, & Carvalho, 2010). In Hong Kong, development of the sector is largely directed by the government and through its subdivisions, the University Grants Committee (UGC) and the Research Grants Council (RGC). Marginson (2011, October/November) classifies Hong Kong as belonging to the "post-Confucian" model, whose characteristics include a crucial state role in supervising, shaping, and driving the sector. State steering, in fact, is quite visible in their rather direct reform attempts, such as pushes for institutional mergers, role differentiation, and privatization. However, the extent of state steering remains on the system level to encourage a competitive environment and leaves individual institutions autonomy for their own strategic actions (Postiglione, 2013).

Higher education in Hong Kong, therefore, has gone through various reforms in recent years. By the time the Education Commission submitted reform proposals in 2000, the higher education sector was well recognized as playing a pivotal role in the development of the city-state's knowledge-based economy (EC, 2000). To foster competitiveness and productivity of the sector, the government has introduced new policies and transformation plans, based on principles of managerialism, marketization, and privatization (Mok & Tan, 2004). Despite its reluctance to increase financial support, the Hong Kong government has demanded better quality and greater capacity. In the background is the vision of making the city-state a regional hub of higher education and competition with rapidly growing neighbors, such as the Chinese mainland and Singapore (Cheung,

2012).

HKU's strategic development plans illustrate some of the ways the university has translated these reform directions into institutional policies. For instance, three strategic themes for 2009–2014 were set as: "Enhancing the Student Learning Experience," "Advancing Research and Innovation," and "Promoting Knowledge Exchange and Demonstrating Leadership in Communities across the Region" (HKU, 2009). This paper does not intend to cover the entire picture of these reform initiatives. Yet, it is important at this point to introduce several new areas of university missions in relation to the larger context as they are closely related to the emergence of new professionals.

Public funding cuts have been a major burden for higher education in various parts of the world, caused by limited public financial resources, neoliberal policies, and public pressures for accountability. In Hong Kong, one of the implications has been a push for entrepreneurial initiatives, which generate revenues to offset the lack of funding. Self-financed academic programs became a popular approach, enthusiastically supported by the government as they also absorb the demand by a large student body without access to local UGC-funded programs (Wan, 2011; Yang, 2006). Recruitment of international students became a highly strategic area as it feeds into creating an education hub. Both the government and universities are eager to attract talent from overseas through incentives like a generous PhD fellowship scheme. At HKU, nearly half of the graduate students are international, and Chinese mainland students are the overwhelming majority, counting for 74.5% in 2013/2014 (HKU, 2014). Naturally, the Chinese mainland is an important market for entrepreneurial endeavors; however, the presence of Hong Kong universities, especially prestigious ones like HKU, is much smaller than that of its counterparts from countries like Australia (Yang, 2012).

Quality and quantity of research output have gained considerable attention. It has become a prominent evaluation measure for academic staff to begin with. Like in the United States and other Western countries, academics in Hong Kong face high pressure to "publish or perish" (Leung, 2007). Prevalence of international university rankings has exacerbated the tendency, as research outputs are highly weighted criteria (Hazelkorn, 2009). Research also plays a significant entrepreneurial role. It is a means of revenue generation through commissioned research, industry partnership, patents, and licensing (Siegel,

Waldman, Atwater, & Link, 2003). The UGC-run Research Assessment Exercise and other institutional assessment practices have been instilled and periodically revised in order to manage research output through regulations and resource allocations (Currie, 2008).

A more recent change was an undergraduate curriculum reform from a three-year British model to a four-year American model beginning in September 2012 (Mok & Cheung, 2011). During this process, HKU creatively adapted to the change by installing a combination of new programs under Teaching and Learning in order to strengthen its whole undergraduate education. Among them, the Common Core Curriculum is the main component of the new curriculum. Modeled after American liberal arts education, it was designed to provide a broader interdisciplinary learning experience (Hennock, 2010, July 18). Introduction of experiential learning programs was another dimension of the reform. The main architect of the reform scheme explains that students can effectively acquire problem-solving skills and make sense of theoretical knowledge by encountering real-life challenges (Tsui, 2012). Experiential programs are now incorporated into various university curricula and programs, handled by a designated center and individual academic departments. Along with these new programs, HKU established a student support mechanism for undergraduate students. The university-wide academic advising system consists of a central advising office under the Registry, appointed faculty-based advisers, residential student advisers and a web-based advisory system (AAO, 2013).

One last initiative that should be mentioned here is eLearning, which has been further developed along with the above projects. In 2012 HKU founded an eLearning Pedagogical Support Unit under the Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL), with endorsement provided by the university Senate. Since its launch, it has rapidly advanced teaching and learning technologies at HKU, such as the introduction of Moodle, numerous collaborations with faculties, and development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as its latest enterprise (EPSU, 2014). The new initiatives are run in close association with the Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS) and CETL. These two centers, specialized units, and designated faculty academics and administrators closely collaborate in the organization of these programs. As a result, the programs span across organizational boundaries while being uniquely optimized for diverse student learning.

The list of new university missions may rapidly evolve in accordance with policy changes in the competitive environment. This research, however, focused on the areas mentioned above: entrepreneurial activities, internationalization, strategic uses of research, and new Teaching and Learning programs including eLearning. They not only represent the strategic themes but also match new missions referred to in the literature.

Defining University Staff

Before taking a closer look at research findings, this section provides an overview of taxonomical discussions and a conceptual framework for defining university staff, which can be a difficult and contentious process. Definitions are considered to be a reflection of and sometimes even a source of a particular structure instilled within university. Gornall (1999) points out the traditional dichotomy between academics and "everyone else" is translated into the popular name of the category: "non-academic" staff (Gornall, 1999, p. 44). Other variations, such as "support" and "general" staff, also imply a similar notion: Academics are the main players, and the others are there to support them. The practice of defining "who they are not" can be a source of conflicts as it ignores the depths and breadths of their work (McInnis, 1998; Collinson, 2006). "Administrative" and "professional" are used as more neutral terms, though they still do not reflect the broad range of functions and specialties university staff may undertake. At HKU, "non-academic" staff are categorized into eight administrative groups: IT Service Support, Technical Support, Financial Administration, Administrative Support, Estates Administration, University Health Service, CEDARS, and Library (HKU, 2006, 2013). The vast range of talent employed certainly leaves the large "non-academic" categorization rather irrelevant.

There is another group important to this study: academic-related staff, another ill-defined category. In the United Kingdom, "academic-related" status is often used to describe high-ranking staff in administrative, managerial, and other professional cadres (see UCU, n.d.). At HKU, it is used more literally to include those staff engaged in "academic-related" work but not professoriate staff. This would include post-doctoral fellows, research-only academics, and language instructors and teaching consultants who are officially given lecturership titles. It

is found that a growing number of professionals are employed under this academic-related category although their main responsibilities are in many ways different from traditional teaching or research. Given these backgrounds, this paper uses "university staff" to refer to non-professoriate staff in general, "administrative" for those who are under non-academic contracts, "academic-related" as used in HKU, and "professional" to reflect specific concepts explored below.

Conceptual Framework for Professional Staff

At this point, it is crucial to map out a conceptual framework for understanding "professional staff." While the definition of "professional" can vary widely, this research draws upon the typology of professional university staff developed by Whitchurch (2009, 2013). In this framework, four categories of professional staff are outlined: (1) bounded professionals; (2) cross-boundary professionals; (3) unbounded professionals; and (4) blended professionals. Among the four, bounded professionals are those who work within clear boundaries, playing prescribed support and bureaucratic roles. Many traditional administrative staff would fall into this category. Cross-boundary professionals utilize their knowledge, memberships, and mobility across boundaries. They are likely to engage in decision-making and capacity building of the institution. Blended professionals are described as those who work in areas like "learning or business partnership, student life, diversity, outreach, institutional research, [program] management and community development" (2009, pp. 408–410). They have experience from contiguous sectors such as adult or further education, regional development, or the charitable sector, together with academic credentials in the form of master's degrees and doctorates (2013, p. 9). Blended professionals are distinguished from bounded professionals whose functions rest within the scope of conventional administrative domain. The emergence of blended professionals is especially important as well as symbolic to the changing nature of university management as explored in previous literature. See Table 1 for comparison of some of the main characteristics.

The framework may not be applied to a real setting in a clear-cut way. For example, as discussed later in this paper, it is becoming common in Hong Kong to find administrative staff attaining a postgraduate degree in order to enhance their professional capacity and employability. Whilst their background may be

Table 1 Main Characteristics of Four Professional Types by Whitchurch

Bounded Professionals	Cross-Boundary Professionals	Unbounded Professionals	Blended Professionals
● Work within firm organizational boundaries, assigned with clear job descriptions; ● Engage mainly in procedural, support, and service roles; ● Reflect continuity, system, and regulations.	● Use knowledge from and access to multiple organizational spaces; ● Move and translate across boundaries; ● Use boundaries as strategic advantages, negotiate across boundaries, and engage politically.	● Disregard organizational boundaries and focus on broadly based projects; ● Construct new institutional knowledge; ● Likely to draw on experience, knowledge and network.	● Function across professional and academic domains; ● Integrate knowledge from two dimensions; ● Legitimacy based on academic credentials; ● Duality of identities both as academic and professional.

Source: Adapted from C. Whitchurch (2013). *Reconstructing identities in higher education: The rise of "third space professionals."* London, England: Routledge, pp. 6–13.

seen similar to that of blended professionals, their roles often stay within the administrative domain, functioning rather as bounded professionals. There were also cases where a professional staff had characteristics of multiple types, especially blended and unbounded. Nevertheless, the framework is still a useful analytical tool and provides starting points for assessment of changes occurring with the administrative and professional spheres. It is especially so since these are still new phenomena without any accumulated of studies of them in Hong Kong.

The Research

The empirical data in this study were collected through qualitative interviews with 10 university staff members. Each interview was done individually in a private setting. Length of interview session ranged from thirty minutes to over one hour. Interview questions were mainly focused on role perceptions, work experience, boundaries, relationship, and career. The researcher either took notes or audio-recorded upon permission.

All the participants were employees of HKU. The research site was fixed to the single university in order to limit variables and to understand the phenomena in the specific context. As anticipated in the planning stage, access to suitable research participants was one of the difficulties in this research. Unlike academic staff, background and job responsibility of university staff are rarely made available to the public. In a large institution like HKU, it is also common that the

same job areas are shared across different organizational units. For example, international partnership is dealt with by both academic departments and a central office. Without such insider information, identifying suitable informants was already an exploratory process. The researcher began by approaching staff in positions and departments that likely covered specialized and emerging dimensions found in the literature. Additional informants were selected and approached, based on new findings. In some cases, interviewees provided information about possible research participants.

The 10 interviewees had mixed profiles. Besides a bachelor's degree, all the interviewees either had a master-level degree or were enrolled in a master's program. Three held a doctorate in addition. Geographical locations of their alma maters ranged from Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. They all either belonged to organizational units or were given responsibilities concerning new university missions identified above, namely, internationalization, IT, Teaching and Learning, student services, research services, and self-financed programs. Four interviewees were employed under traditional administrative contracts, five were under academic-related appointments, and one was taking on an administrative position but originally had been an academic staff. Differences in these appointments turned out to be a crucial variable that affected professional dimensions.

In the course of research, it became apparent that new professionals, who held characteristics of blended or unbounded professionals, were increasingly employed under "academic-related" appointments at HKU. Whereas the "academic-related" category broadly includes non-professoriate academic positions like teaching-only and research-only staff, several professionals were accommodated in this category to work in new missions, such as Teaching and Learning. They recognized themselves as a new cadre of university staff, distinct from either administrative, professoriate, or other types of academic-related staff. In other cases, traditional administrative structures were also responsible for new missions. Job nature and perceptions in the two appointment categories sometimes crossed over the boundary in such cases. For example, some administrative staff enjoyed a similar sense of autonomy over their job responsibilities as academic-related staff did. The ways in which the university handled new university missions through human resource structures took various shapes, reflecting the complexity of university operations. See Table 2 for a list

of the research participants.

Table 2 Research Participant Profiles

No	Type of Appointments	Degree	Job Rank
IP1	Administrative	Bachelor	Junior
IP2	Academic-Related	Master	N/A
IP3	Administrative	Bachelor	Senior
IP4	Academic-Related	Master	N/A
IP5	Academic-Related	Doctor	Senior
IP6	Academic-Related	Master	N/A
IP7	Academic-Related	Doctor	N/A
IP8	Administrative	Master	Junior
IP9	Administrative	Master	Senior
IP10	Academic	Doctor	Senior

Note. "Degree" refers to type of academic qualification each participant had. In "Job Rank" "Senior" refers to those in supervisory or equivalent positions. Most academic-related staff were given specialist titles such as "Consultant," therefore, not applicable in this scale.

Considering the fairly small number of participants, this study does not intend to claim generality of its findings. Instead, it explores unique individual cases of new professionals and administrative staff, whose roles are increasingly crucial in HKU. It aims to provide a base for further study of this topic on a larger scale or in a similar setting. Moreover, academic-related staff interviewed in this research were relatively new to HKU since their employment occurred when their projects based on new missions were formulated. Most of them had spent three years or less at HKU at the time of the interviews. Future studies may reveal different outcomes as they spend more time in the institution or as this appointment system matures.

Findings

In this section, the author explores ways in which boundaries between academic and university staff are (not) blurred in HKU, drawing upon verbatim quotations from interview sessions. Findings are clustered for assessment in four areas: Qualification, Work and Role, Organization, and Career.

Qualification

In Hong Kong, it is known that taught postgraduate programs have served "manpower needs in the knowledge economy, as well as to enhance career development of members of the workforce" (Sutherland, 2002, p. 26). Programs in disciplines such as education and public administration are increasingly offered by institutions across Hong Kong and remain popular among university workers. Several interviewees in this research also studied and attained a degree in one of many postgraduate programs in Hong Kong. Relevance of academic background, however, was perceived differently. Master-level education in particular was sometimes regarded as mere credential makeup but "not useful" because of how it was appreciated based on its relevance to their work.

> I don't think [postgraduate education is] very important. However, in Hong Kong, there are many people getting academic qualifications in order to make them look more competitive in the market. It looks good on the CV, but for skills, it does not make much difference whether you have a higher degree or not. (IP8)

Further education would be perceived as effective if its contents were directly applicable. Another interviewee noted that administrative staff might benefit from practical curriculum like case studies rather than academic or theoretical contents, considering the nature of their work. The idea of "usefulness" was noticeable in various responses including the one below.

> I applied to a program about the Chinese mainland when I was in another section. I was thinking that it would benefit me to understand and to know more up-to-date matters of the Chinese mainland, which would contribute to my work at that time. Then, I got moved to another section when I was just admitted to the program! (IP9)

Some interviewees acknowledged the benefit of postgraduate education as expanding their capacity, enhancing academic understanding, and simply personal motivation. They also regarded it as a proof of their familiarity with university education systems and the academic side of university work. Even when specific knowledge gained in curriculum was not directly connected to their work, the whole experience would be. In either case, master's degrees seemed to be less recognized as "academic" credentials in this context. This trend

is rather different from cases found in Collinson (2007), in which master-level degrees become qualifications to undertake certain academic responsibilities.

For academic-related staff, it was apparent that both their specialized skills and academic competences had become their distinctive assets as professionals. Their research fields were more or less directly related to projects they were assigned to, especially for those with doctoral degrees. One feature that may differentiate them from regular academics is ways in which their competencies are defined as instruments for their projects. Likewise, their identities may also be framed based on their association with the projects, which would feed into the collaborative nature of their work embedded in a team. It contrasts with faculty academics, whose works are traditionally regarded as autonomous and self-regulated, although such privileges have been challenged in the changing environment (McInnis, 2010).

> I think we all bring in different expertise to the team. Having PhD experience has given me a set of skills and expertise other people without PhD training may not possess. For example, our centre is also interested in doing research…, and my PhD training definitely has helped in that regard because I have done a lot of research training and projects…. But it is only a portion of what we do. I bring in many other components, and so do other team members, to complement each other. (IP7)

An academic qualification may become a source of credibility especially when working with academic staff. The view was expressed by both administrative and academic-related staff. Administrative staff generally saw an academic qualification as a key condition for their career progress, despite this not being officially stated. “Having some academic background is good in university because you communicate with academic colleagues easier. You can also identify what academics do and hopefully can create and provide better support for them” (IP10).

Several academic-related staff viewed academic credentials as a source of trust or respect from academic colleagues with whom they work in their projects. Better collaboration, or at least communication, would be achieved as credentials could position them on an equal ground with academic staff. Similar discussions are also found in other studies (e.g., Berman & Pitman, 2010). Yet, it is questionable how visible their background may be to academics. Collinson (2007)

reports cases where academic staff may fail to recognize or even anticipate their non-professoriate colleagues as having equal academic credentials. A similar experience was expressed by one interviewee. “Most academic staff do not know that I have an academic background. I think they regard us as ‘administrative staff’ even when we have academic qualifications” (IP8).

In summary, academic qualification as a boundary is apparently being blurred but with contrasting implications for the two groups. Administrative staff seek for higher credentials, but it is hard to observe “blurring” toward their academic counterpart. On the other hand, some academic-related staff had had academic training equivalent to academic staff but with contrastive perception of its value. Their perception toward a distinction from academics is further explored below.

Work and Role

When asked how they perceived and comprehended academic and administrative roles and boundaries, administrative staff tended to see their involvement in university management as purely administrative though playing vital functions.

> I started working as an Administrative Assistant, and the responsibility was solely procedural: Academics make decisions and administrative staff implement them. After years of experience, the complexity of my work has increased. I am in close communication with senior management, attend their meetings and hear their discussions. So, I am fully involved in the process; however, the pattern is the same to this day, in a way that administrative staff take on implementation based on decisions made by academics. (IP3)

Another administrative staff reported indirect involvement in affecting the process of academic decision-making. A Norwegian case in Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) found a similar perspective among administrative staff that “a university cannot run successfully without their administrativ expertise” (p. 465).

> We facilitate for academics to make right decisions. They have big ideas that are not always feasible, so we have to play the other part. Ultimately, they make final decisions and are responsible for actual contents, but we take care of budgets, employment, and all the approval procedures, and it sometimes involves us “steering” academics. (IP8)

Responses by academic-related staff suggested formulation of unique identities that were not confined to conventional organizational structures. They often recognized that their roles included both academic and administrative components, of which their projects were comprised. “I belong to both academic and admin areas. I engage in student education through teaching workshops though it is not that frequent. I spend significant time working with organizations outside, which regular academic staff would not do much” (IP6).

On the other side of the coin, they may perceive themselves as belonging to neither side but rather to a new category altogether.

> My work is more like a “field-work advisor.” It is kind of in-between academic and administration. It is not really “academic,” and I do not really want to be an academic. It is not really “administration” either. Although I do some administrative work and work with administrative staff in the office, it is limited to my program. (IP4)

Others may take the view that any university work is more than simple administration because they are connected to educational and academic functions. Student services, for example, involve supporting students in areas ranging from financial, personal and social to academic. As these support functions are tightly associated with the educational domain, university staff working in student support should play educational and academic functions rather than solely administrative (Jones, 2012). One respondent specifically argued for a “blurring” of job boundaries from this viewpoint.

> I think the distinction should be blurred. Anything that happens in university should be related to research, teaching, and learning. People doing administration are indeed supporting very important academic functions.… I wouldn’t say that my job is academic, but it is certainly a part of student learning, which is a very important one. (IP10)

The concept, however, may be understood differently.

> Our roles are more administrative. Even though there are learning and education components in our job, there are still distinctions between academic and administrative roles. Important decisions and goals are set by academics, using academic and professional knowledge. Administrative role is to execute the plans and logistics

> accordingly. (IP1)

Findings on this topic highlighted the difficulty of applying the simple academic-administration dichotomy in the breadth of changing university work. In many areas of the institution, a strong conceptual boundary certainly existed between academics as decision makers and administration as a support function. Nevertheless, certain organizational units operated without academic management. They had both autonomy and responsibility to design and operate activities to complete their own missions. Such activities may include academic work like teaching short courses, designing parts of the curriculum, academic counseling, and even research. Though still limited, they were found in several offices, centers and departments across the university.

Three interviewees had doctoral degrees and records of academic activities, including research publications. They were all asked about their decision to work in a professional or administrative position rather than academic. One respondent considered university services more meaningful because of their wide-reaching educational benefit over the large student population. The impact of the particular administrative work could be more significant, in comparison to academic outputs whose audience is usually limited to a community of scholars. In another case, it was important for a professional staff to maintain a balance between the two spheres. It is natural for certain academic disciplines, such as fields in education, to be applied into practical settings. Scholars in these disciplines may feel comfortable working in a “non-academic” area while applying their theoretical knowledge and analytical abilities.

> Typically, someone would commit several years to get a PhD degree, so that they would work as a faculty member.… I made a conscious choice to go work in industry, and that was also the area I spent time developing my expertise and insights during PhD education, including organizational effectiveness, organizational management, strategic development, and adult learning. (IP7)

Organization

Ability to negotiate organizational boundaries is a key function of new professionals, which distinguishes them from conventional bounded professionals. It is also a necessary ground for engagement in new institutional

missions. Organizational setup, therefore, is an essential variable as it affects degrees in which professionals may apply their expertise and function in the environment. Yet, several studies report tensions between academic and administrative staff, deriving from different working cultures, organizational hierarchy, and expansion of managerial control (Seyd, 2000; Fratzl & McKay, 2013). Academics may neglect administrative work as supplementary, possible obstacles, and a production cost of academic work rather than factors of production (Kauffman, 1990; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). Hence, the interviews further explored how academic and other university staff interacted within the new missions at HKU. In a brief summary, their relationship was not likely to be of much concern in these cases. Independence of their operations was an essential factor, as these units involved academic staff only at a distance. For example, internship programs would involve faculty academics as supervisors for participating students, but without their roles extending much further. The program design and planning, contact with outside parties, and other procedural work were mainly dealt by a specialized subunit. Different organizational setups were found for other missions, but the autonomous nature was likely to persist, whether it is a center or a unit within a traditional faculty.

In cases where new missions were handled by conventional administrative structures or individuals, academic staff tended to be involved thoroughly. For example, despite their entrepreneurial nature, self-financed programs were operated in a similar manner as regular academic programs, based on the traditional academic-administration collaboration. Similarly, research services were principally managed by academics. In either system, experience of working with individual academic staff was often described in positive terms. Most staff considered their relationship as cooperative and friendly, and experience of tensions as described in the literature was seldom found among the interviewees.

Professional staff valued flexibility and freedom allowed to complete their tasks, especially in comparison with regular administrative departments. They often described organizational culture as flat and collaborative rather than hierarchical. They also felt motivated to take initiatives and be creative with their work.

> I have much freedom in developing what I want to do and also receive a lot of support for that. For example, I just developed my own project, which is closely based on my

> experience and network. I developed it on my own, proposed it, and got it approved by the faculty. (IP6)

Nonetheless, even within the administrative cadre, the degree of academic management may vary between organizational units. Some administrative departments may operate more autonomously partly because of their specialized roles. For example, despite its wide and comprehensive impact, internationalization is organized by primarily administrative entities. One interviewee acknowledged that both the decision-making process and operations were solely managed by a team of administrative staff, although the university management prescribed institutional directions. The interviewee would admit to possessing comprehensive autonomy over strategic and creative decisions, which was not heard in other administrative units. It suggests that they may have moved beyond unbounded professionals in their ability to negotiate with formal organizational boundaries, despite the fact their autonomy was attributed to the administrative team rather than individuals. This is comparable to many academic-related staff whose job responsibilities were self-contained and comprehensive for an overarching goal of completing their project. The conception contrasts with traditional administration-academic relationships, which are more complementary within a larger organizational construct.

While academic-related staff enjoyed flexibility within their confined areas, rigid official structures still became a burden to certain cross-boundary activities. One such area was interdisciplinary projects. Despite increasing institutional interest, bureaucratic complications existed when starting up a cross-departmental program, possibly because of the tradition of strong faculty culture. In another case, barriers prevented a blended professional from moving beyond the assigned job boundary.

> I guess there are some obstacles with opportunities. Teaching, for example. Even if I want to teach, there are constraints because of official structures. Maybe there will be constraints career-wise too…. Research is fine. I can still publish on my own. In fact, I work with people in other places to collaborate for my research. This is for my personal interest and not for this job. (IP5)

Some professional staff felt that their academic quality was recognized but

utilized for specific projects. Each organizational unit had limited flexibility to apply their capacity beyond the formal boundaries surrounding the unit.

Boundaries and flexibility were also embedded in titles and types of appointment. Academic-related staff tended to enjoy more autonomy though it is questionable whether the type of appointment was a cause, an effect, or a condition of the autonomy. A closer look revealed that there were further complexities associated with the official structure. For example, the following response illustrates implicit hierarchy based on types of appointment.

> Importance of academic status is true in some degree, and being on the academic appointment is important because it gives certain credentials. So, some people would say having a "Lecturer" title is better for your survival… but the title is too narrow for me. I prefer the original "Teaching Consultant" title, which would give me more flexibility, space, and less definition. At this point, I am able to focus on project creation, which is my interest and expertise. (IP2)

Certain arrangements were unique and perhaps experimental.

> This office is under a formal administrative structure, and I have an official administrative title, but I am also appointed as an academic-related staff. HKU is a traditionally structured institution, and dual appointments like mine are rare. Maybe it is because this area is quite new, and I expect that there will be more people like this. Because of the administrative title, I fit into the traditional hierarchy. However, in reality I am a bit out of the hierarchical system. It gives flexibility but also added difficulty in figuring out ways. (IP5)

Several respondents discussed the multi-layered effect of cultural contexts on professional dimensions. Based on experience of working in an American research university, one respondent pointed out that social structure remained more hierarchical and traditional at HKU and in an Asian society in general. Academic credentials, ranks, positions, and other hierarchies granted more attention at HKU both on surface and on a deeper level. Interviewees reported the existence of strong institutional culture, characterized as substantial academic control at the departmental level. The central office leaves much freedom for faculty to manage its own, more so than at other Hong Kong universities.

Career

In universities in Hong Kong, employment of university staff is predominantly contract-based. The lack of a stable employment system contributes to constant movement of university staff among institutions and sometimes out of the sector. One respondent commented on negative influences of high turnover in the office. Yet, it was not clear to what extent professional staff assumed stability as an important condition. Some of them were comfortable with rather indefinite career paths.

> Career path, like tenure and ladder, is not my priority. My priority is the job itself, the quality and the result of my work. About career development, I do not know. I have been learning a lot and seeing opportunities in this position. I meet new people everyday and keep my options open. (IP6)

Academic-related staff were hired for specific expertise relevant to their assigned projects. These skillsets and knowledge were often considered transferrable across higher education and other sectors. NGOs and other educational organizations may have somewhat similar contexts as universities. Even when professionals moved from a private industry to higher education, they did not conceptualize it as a significant boundary crossing but rather as continuation of utilizing their specialist skillsets.

> A move from another field to education was not an important aspect for me. Coming to work here was continuing what I have been doing-creating projects, which would use the same skills as previous jobs. Even in different industries, skillset required were the same. (IP2)

One of the biggest disparities between administrative and academic-related staffs existed in their perceptions concerning professionalism and boundary crossing. Administrative staff held rather confined views of career path, based on type of sector, education and public services. By contrast, factors such as their learning, relevance to their expertise, and impact of their work proved to be decisive aspects.

> My skillset can be applied in many different types of organizations for different purposes.

> The reason why I accepted this position was much to do with this project, and I am excited about its future though there are still uncertainties. But, does that mean I am going to stay working in universities doing this? I don't know. (IP7)

For those who have rigid academic backgrounds, such as a PhD and extensive publication records, a shift to a professoriate position was regarded as a possibility. Yet, a distance between research and practical work may be felt.

> I think that is a difficulty for academics to turn into an administrator because it is very hard to go back. Having left the field for so long, I'm not able to catch up with the latest literature, for instance. I don't even know what's going on in the last publications of the field. (IP10)

Here, nature of the research field would be an important variable. Extensive research facilities and equipment would require significant investment in terms of both time and financial resources. Work such as lab-based research would be especially difficult to be resumed after a break or even to be continued alongside a non-academic appointment. To the other side, it may be easier to balance academic and professional works in fields like higher education.

Finally, the third space is still a new dimension with limited job availability in terms of fields, positions, and rank ladders. As Whitchurch (2013) points out, "the lack of a defined career path" (p. 127) within higher education institutions may leave professionals in a temporary space rather than utilize their talents in a long run.

> Ideally, there is a balance between academic and practical elements in responsibilities, a position that allows a combination of contribution through research, practical involvement with students, and teaching. However such positions are not always available. While taking an administrative position, I continue to do research. I'd rather have a variety of options available, including that of a researcher. (IP5)

Discussion

In this study, blurring of academic and administrative boundaries occurred through expansion of the new academic-related category. The three groups were

still separated by types of appointments and other organizational boundaries. To a large degree, types of appointment represented profiles and roles of university staff while it likely gave academic-related staff certain credentials as opposed to a simple administrative status as in similar dynamics found in cases of Japanese national universities (Oba, 2008). These boundaries, however, are artificial and obsolete in the face of diverse and complex university work. New university missions not only involve both academic and administrative elements but also have become so specialized that they require expertise and appropriate organizational design. Current boundaries in fact work against the creation of a functioning work environment by constraining flexible collaboration of talents under different appointments. It further prohibits potential up-skilling of administrative staff by confining them in bounded roles.

Administrative staff remained to perceive their roles as support and procedural though there were signs for changes. First, some new missions were handled in self-contained administrative departments. Administrative staff had a substantial degree of autonomy and responsibility toward completion of their missions. Second, there is increasing recognition for educational or academic aspects in administrative works. However, spread of such notion may be initiated by academics, rather than as bottom up. It is important to remember that administrative staff may play important roles in forming institutional culture in a long run since they are the largest category of the university employees (HKU, 2014). Professionalization of administrative staff, therefore, can greatly contribute to enhancement of university management; however, current staff development practices were not found effective. There is much need to reconsider how staff development can be more relevant, along with development of opportunity structures, in which administrative staff are motivated to move beyond support and procedural roles. Considering changing university missions today, there is much space for up-skilled administrative staff.

New human resource frameworks must be developed to recognize complex and widening dimensions of university work. The frameworks should connect areas of assigned job responsibility, assessment, and career path in order to attract university staff, regardless of their appointment. As both their backgrounds and career prospects are “no longer necessarily homogeneous or linear,” the university needs to be “creative and innovative in [its] approach to human resource management” (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007, p. 13). The

approach, however, must be designed to encourage university staff to stay and prosper in the institution rather than as temporary guest workers. With extensive experience and abilities from other fields, professional staff can contribute significantly to continuous development of the university in the long run.

Organizational characteristics such as specialization, professionalization, degrees of formalization and centralization determine innovativeness of an organization (Damanpour, 1991). It goes without saying that innovation is a core outcome the university seeks by bringing new professionals into new missions (Yeung, 2011). While organizational arrangements found in interviews are still varied and evolving, it is valuable to further discuss what may be a sound setup. As claimed by Altbach (2001), the academic tradition of prestigious institutions seemed to play a role in retaining academic control within academic departments, but may not be so at the institutional level. These findings reveal a co-existence of traditional academic departments and new autonomous units. Even within academic departments, self-contained subunits have been borne. Maintenance of the duality will be a crucial assignment if the third space is to play further roles in the institution. One of the interviewees discussed the need for a hybrid management model to better handle widening university missions. "As the university becomes bigger, the needs of different faculties become more unique.… I think a hybrid model is what we need. It is getting harder and harder for a central office to oversee major university functions" (IP10).

In the model, central offices (either under the Registry or more autonomous units) and academic departments may negotiate to better accommodate short and middle range projects, rather than relying on firmly established structures. It is already seen in areas like experiential learning and knowledge exchange. Autonomous centers function as main drivers and take on institution-wide projects while academic departments also engage their own resources to accommodate specific needs. Professionals in both sides collaborate with each other through formal and informal channels, possibly building loose networks based on shared missions and identities. The hybrid model relies not only on conventional organizational architecture but also on horizontal webs of individuals. Both administrative and academic-related staff in this study had such networks, but the latter apparently utilized them more extensively.

It is important to further discuss continuity of the new organizational units. Because they were created under influence of recent higher education reforms, it

is questionable whether they will be permanent structures or project-based provisions. As mentioned earlier, many of them are part of the university's strategic themes for the 2009–2014 period. By moving into the next five-year span with new management directions, how will the institutional foci on these missions change? Moreover, increasing pressures for relevance and accountability leave the higher education sector susceptible in face of reforms (Altbach, 2007). Will the university create more units like these as an adaptation strategy? One possibility is creation of more loosely-defined autonomous centers, within which short-term project-based subunits work to serve different institutional requests. CETL is one example. It is responsible for a wide variety of programs, ranging from professional development for teachers to creation of MOOCs, all under the umbrella of Teaching and Learning.

Conclusion

Borrowing an expression by one of the respondents, university staff as "middle men" is an indispensable function to moderate between academic and other spheres. Expansion of "other" spheres is symbolic of both changes in the nature of academic production and a tilt toward managerial control (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; Rogers & Schofield, 2013). As expressed in the image of "hollowing out" (Macfarlane, 2011), the transformation happens along with fragmentation of academic roles, which may negatively impact areas like teaching and public engagement. To this point, findings in this research suggest that the "non-academic" dimension is becoming more academic. Not to mention academic-related staff, administrative staff are also becoming more educated "middle men," despite how the postgraduate degree is currently positioned. Can they become a factor to benefit academic values through shared identity and knowledge? A collaborative environment across boundaries may enhance such a possibility by nurturing a synthetic organizational culture (Marginson, 2000). However, the current picture of "managed professionals" (Rhoades, 1998) may add more conceptually to a managerial culture within the institution.

This exploratory study provided implications for possible research in future. To begin with, the lack of higher education research about university administration in Hong Kong is a significant burden in the study of this topic. Unlike topics such as academic organizations or institutional management (e.g.,

Mok & Lee, 2000; Postiglione, 2013), administrative organization has rarely become a focus of extensive research. Accumulation of both academic research and official statistics is imperative for the assessment of the biggest group of university workers. More specifically on the topic of professionalization and changing university staff in Hong Kong, further studies in other universities would be a substantial addition. Institutional comparisons will provide valuable insights into effects of variables like academic tradition, organizational culture and adaptation strategies to higher education reforms. Finally, perceptions of academic staff about these changes should be further explored. In this study, professoriate staff had limited roles in the operation of new missions, despite their status as the main actors in terms of academic production. A closer look at the interaction of academics with the professional sphere may have important implications for effective engagement in diverse university missions.

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