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A descriptive study of professional staff, and their careers, in Australian and UK universities

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Abstract

Professional staff number approximately 23 per cent of total staff in universities in the UK, which in 2014/15 was the equivalent of 95,870 individuals (hesa.ac.uk). With their increasing span of responsibility, it is surprising that there has been little research into the careers of these staff. This study, part of a larger careers study, highlights some key attitudes to, and needs from, their careers. Via a multi-method instrument, of which only descriptive statistics are presented here, it is shown that professional staff are motivated by an integrated set of needs attributed to traditional, boundaryless and protean career theory. It is also shown that professional staff overall are satisfied in their roles but there is a mismatch between the desire for a career and promotion opportunities, and those forthcoming from their organisations.

Key words

Higher education, professional staff, careers, career theory, satisfaction, motivation

Introduction

Higher education has been reported to contribute £73 billion to the UK economy (Kelly, McNicoll and White, 2012, 1) and \$25 billion to the Australian economy (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015, vi). Due to the size of these operations, universities require significant numbers of staff to manage their functions. Universities' core mission is to generate and distribute knowledge, but with increasing government regulation and oversight, there is an extensive business operation with the commitment need for professional staff to manage these functions in support of teaching and research. Figure 1 shows the percentages of different staff types as collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the UK (2014/15 data). In Australia in 2015 non-academic staff made up 55.4 per cent of the total (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Staff data is not collected in this level of detail in Australia but if a similar percentage of professional staff exists there would be 15,119 professional staff in Australian universities.

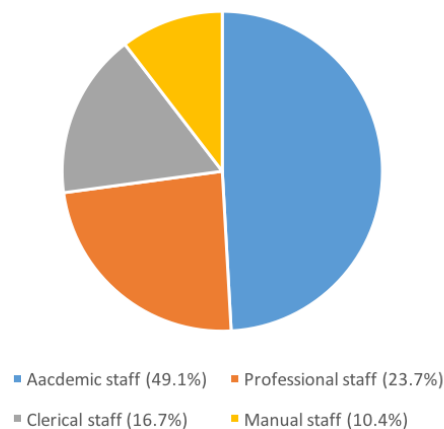


Figure 1 Percentages of different staff types in UK universities in 2014/15 (hesa.ac.uk)¹

¹ Professional staff is the 'managerial, professional and technical' staff category as defined by HESA.

This paper reports on some descriptive statistics from a larger study on the careers of professional staff and serves as an important contribution to the current scholarship of professional staff working in Australia and the UK.

Literature Review

The academic literature remains surprisingly silent on this increasingly large and diverse category of professional staff. Szekeres (2006) and Lewis (2014) raised this paradox of the invisible, hidden, unnoticed and undervalued professional staff which was at odds with their increasing positions of authority, importance and centrality to the operation of their organisation. Indeed Scott (1995 p. 64) noted that ‘an upgrading of managerial capacity ... was one of the most significant but underrated phenomenon of the last two decades.’ Eveline (2004, 147) in her research at the University of Western Australia argued that the work of general staff² is given little credit as a ‘skilled performance of duties’ and therefore they gained little reward or attention and given little chance for development (*ibid.*, 151). She went on to say that the work of these staff in building and maintaining relationships was indispensable but was ‘unseen and unsung’ (*ibid.*, 138).

Graham (2009, 175) noted that ‘with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and performance of staff directly impacting upon the quality and effectiveness of university work ... the people management issues ... have not been taken as seriously as those for academic staff – despite general staff comprising over 50 per cent of staff in Australian universities.’ Eveline (2004, 148) also argued that in Australian universities the skills and development needs of business management staff were relatively unrecognized. From a UK perspective Michael Shattock (2003, 179) contended that as management is a major component of university success, and professional staff are critical to this process, then the training of this category of staff is critically important.

A report by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK (LFHE 2010, 6) on a study of 12,000 higher education staff, found that professional staff were attracted to the sector by the ‘opportunity to use skills/experience’, ‘a friendly work environment’, ‘career security’ and ‘salary’; senior staff also placed emphasis on sector values. Once recruited, they were committed to staying within their organisation and agreed to a ‘high’ extent that higher education offered a worthwhile career. However, they reported that their current salary could induce them to leave as could an opportunity to develop their career. In Australia a report published in 2012 (Strachan et al. 2012) which surveyed 32,983 general staff in 19 universities showed that 75 per cent of respondents ‘strongly or somewhat agreed’ that they were satisfied with their job, 63 per cent were satisfied with career opportunities at either their own university or in the sector, and 54 per cent said that within the next five years they would like to be in a higher-level role.

In light of the findings noted above there has been some debate around the lack of senior promotion opportunities for professional staff with Bassnett (2005), Lauwerys (2002) and Wild and Wooldridge (2009) all noting that across the sector the majority of the very senior posts are being filled by staff from other sectors. These authors cautioned against this trend and suggested that universities must avoid this by ensuring that their own staff are developed so they can successfully contend for promotions. A report by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK noted that:

² Includes professional, clerical and manual staff.

It is time to think afresh about the professional career in universities, to ensure that professional ... [staff] can develop a breadth of experience that maximises their contribution to their HEI and places them in the best position to take advantage of development and promotion opportunities to the very top of the organisation. (Wild and Wooldridge 2009, 5)

In their qualitative study of 34 case studies (*ibid.*) they reported that most staff felt that they had to manage their own career development and take ownership of their own career progress, but had found limited advancement opportunities apart from when re-organisations took place. Five years after that report which concluded with recommendations for actions universities should take, Duncan (2014) reported that the issue of promotion is one that still concerns many staff in UK HE.

We know from these and other studies that professional staff desire certain career variables as mentioned above, however, in none of these studies has career theory been aligned with the raw data. For example, do professional staff value traditional careers or contemporary careers? Table 1 outlines the differences between traditional careers and the contemporary career. Traditional careers within organisations are measured by hierarchical position, salary status and responsibility – an individual’s career is sub-ordinate to the organisation’s requirements. The two main theories of contemporary careers are protean and boundaryless orientations. The protean career (Hall, 2004) focusses on the idea of psychological success through self-directed career management. The protean career involves a whole-life perspective, developmental progression, continuous self-directed learning, autonomy, flexibility, self-fulfillment, values-driven attitudes and a self-directed attitude to career management (Briscoe, Hall and Frautschy DeMuth 2006 2006). Boundaryless career theory viewed people as not bounded by one organisational career - moving easily between organisations and careers (Arthur and Rousseau 1996, 3-20). Characteristics of this career type are: mobility, flexibility, meaningful work, skill utilization, work-life balance and fulfilling relationships across organisations and at the same time not giving importance to (a specific) organisational promotions and career paths (Briscoe, Hall and Frautschy DeMuth 2006; Forrier, Sels, and Verbruggen 2005).

Table 1. Comparison of the traditional, boundaryless and protean career

Issue	Traditional	Boundaryless	Protean
Autonomy	Low: employer-dependent	High: employer-independent	High: employer-independent
Employment relationship	Performance for job security	Performance for marketability	Performance for satisfaction
Responsibility for career	Organisation	Individual	Individual
Key attitudes	Organisational commitment	Skill utilization, relationships, flexibility, work-life balance	Wok satisfaction, work-life balance, value match, developmental progression, learning opportunities
Core values	Hierarchical advancement	Meaningful work, organisational position	Meaningful work, freedom, growth
Success criteria	Status, salary	Psychological meaningful work	Psychological meaningful work

This study reports on the demographic and employment data, along with overall satisfaction and employee expectations from their university. It goes on to discuss what

career requirements professional staff expect from their universities, and if those expectations are being met to get a clearer picture of professional staff working in universities, their career needs and satisfaction levels as a first step in a greater understanding of their careers needs.

Method

The study utilised a cross-sectional design running between August 2015 and February 2016 and utilized a convenience sample to gather a suitable number of responses. The professional membership organisations of each country (Association of Tertiary Education Managers in Australia [ATEM] and the Association of University Administrators in the UK [AUA]) were contacted and information on the study was included in their mailings to members. The members under study were those on Higher Education Worker contract at level 7 and above in Australia (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2016) and on salary spinal point 30 and above in the UK (University and College Union, 2001).

A new multi-method survey instrument was constructed consisting of measures of satisfaction and career orientation (Briscoe, Hall, and Frautschy DeMuth 2006; Warr et al. 1979). These questions had been previously validated in a pilot of this study, which showed high internal reliability (Gander 2017). Additionally, there were questions related to demographics such as age, gender, educational attainment, and ethnicity, and items relating to work environment such as salary, number of promotions, and employment terms. The data were analysed and descriptive statistics were produced via SPSS v22.

Results

There were 90 responses from Australia and 165 from the UK. Table 2 shows the demographics of the population of each country. The data show that professional staff, as expected from a graduate entry profession, are highly qualified with most UK staff having Masters degrees and Australian staff having an equal split between Honours³ and Masters degrees.

The demographic results show that most staff are in the range 40-49 for both countries, followed by 50-59 in Australia (30%) but 30-39 (22.8%) in the UK, although this was almost similar to the 50-59 category (21.3%). There were far more women working as professional staff in both countries with Australia showing a 72/24 per cent split between female and male staff and the UK showing a 74/15 per cent difference. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of staff were white/Caucasian in both countries.

Table 2 Demographics of professional staff in Australia and the UK (n=90[Aus], n=136[UK])

	Australia	%	UK	%
Highest level of education				
Doctorate	8	8.9	17	12.5
Masters	36	40.0	65	47.8
Honours	36	40.0	36	26.5
High School	5	5.6	2	1.5

³ Most Australian undergraduates do not undertake honours degree. Honours degrees consist of an additional dissertation unit which students must apply for and be accepted on to. In comparison UK undergraduates are automatically enrolled onto Honours degrees.

Pre-high school	1	1.1	0	0.0
Age				
20-29	2	2.2	3	2.2
30-39	20	22.2	31	22.8
40-49	30	33.3	54	39.7
50-59	27	30.0	29	21.3
60+	8	8.9	2	1.5
Gender				
Female	65	72.2	100	73.5
Male	22	24.4	20	14.7
Race/Ethnicity				
White/Caucasian ⁴	78	86.7	112	82.4

The employment characteristics (Table 3) results show that most staff in the UK have worked for their university for longer than 10 years, but in Australia most have worked for their current university for less than five years. However, in both countries staff have worked in their current jobs for less than five years. As would be expected from the age profile staff have been in the labour market for longer than 10 years and most have not had time out of the labour market. Most are permanent and full-time with most the UK staff being on the lowest employment grade. However, in Australia the majority were on the highest employment grade. Most staff were not looking to leave their university in the next 12 months, but most staff in the UK were looking for promotion in the next three years (67.6%). Most staff in both countries have receive neither an award/increment or a promotion in the last three years, although in the UK the percentages are much closer compared with Australia for both these issues.

Table 3 Employment characteristics of professional staff in Australia and the UK (n=90(Aus), n=136(UK))

	Australia	%	UK	%
Tenure in your current job				
<5 year	57	63.3	80	58.8
5-10 years	21	23.3	21	15.4
10+ years	9	10.0	25	18.4
Tenure in your current university				
<5 year	34	64.2	36	26.5
5-10 years	20	22.2	9	6.6
10+ years	33	36.7	49	36.0
Length of time in labour market				

⁴ 15 per cent made up of many other ethnicities including (highest percentages) Asian (2%), black British (2%), Indian sub-continent (1.5%) and mixed race (1.5%).

<5 year	1	1.1	4	2.9
5-10 years	5	5.6	7	5.1
10+ years	81	90.0	115	84.6
How long out of labour market				
None	37	41.1	83	61.0
<12 month	24	26.7	21	15.4
12-24 months	13	14.4	16	11.8
2-5 years	11	12.2	4	2.9
+5 year's	2	2.2	2	1.5
Contracted hours				
Full-time	79	87.8	121	89.0
Part-time	8	8.9	5	3.7
Salary range				
Level/Grade 7	13	14.4	46	33.8
Level/Grade 8	17	18.9	38	27.9
Level/Grade 9	18	20.0	23	16.9
Level/Grade 10	39	43.3	15	11.0
Type of contract				
Permanent	65	72.2	119	87.5
Fixed-term contract	21	23.3	7	5.1
Intent to leave within 12 months				
Yes, actively looking	12	13.3	33	24.3
Possibly	34	37.8	59	43.4
No	53	58.9	67	49.3
Have you received a monetary award/increment in the last 3 years				
No	53	58.9	67	49.3
Yes	34	37.8	59	43.4
Are you considering applying for a promotion in the next 3 years				
No	43	47.8	43	31.6
Yes	34	37.8	92	67.6
How many promotions have you received in the last 3 years				
None	49	54.4	67	49.3

1	23	25.6	45	33.1
2	10	11.1	8	5.9
3	3	3.3	6	4.4
3+	2	2.2	0	0.0

The general satisfaction, and positive and negative affect was also analysed with no significant differences between the two countries. Figure 2 shows that participants were satisfied in their job ($\bar{x}=3.53$) and had more positive emotions towards it ($\bar{x}=3.21$) than negative ($\bar{x}=2.84$).

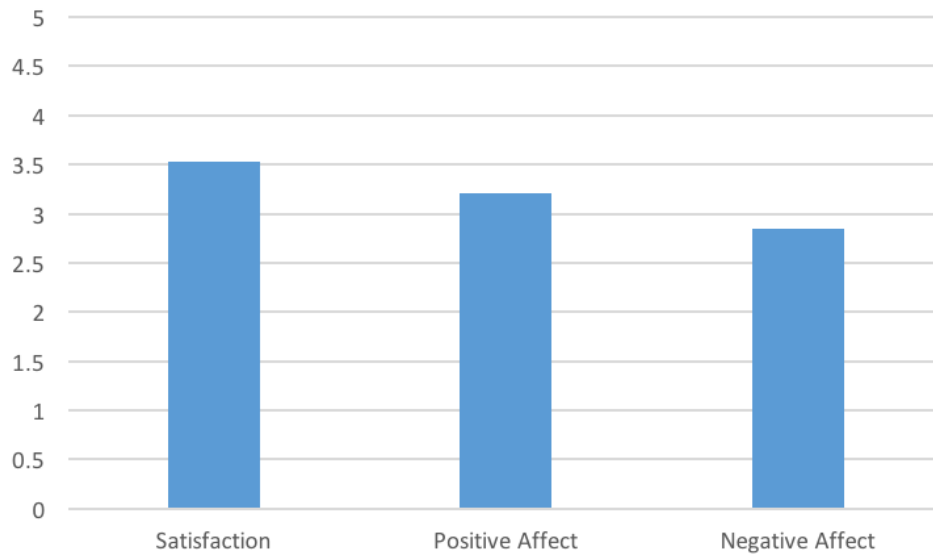


Figure 2 Satisfaction, positive and negative affect of professional staff in Australia and the UK

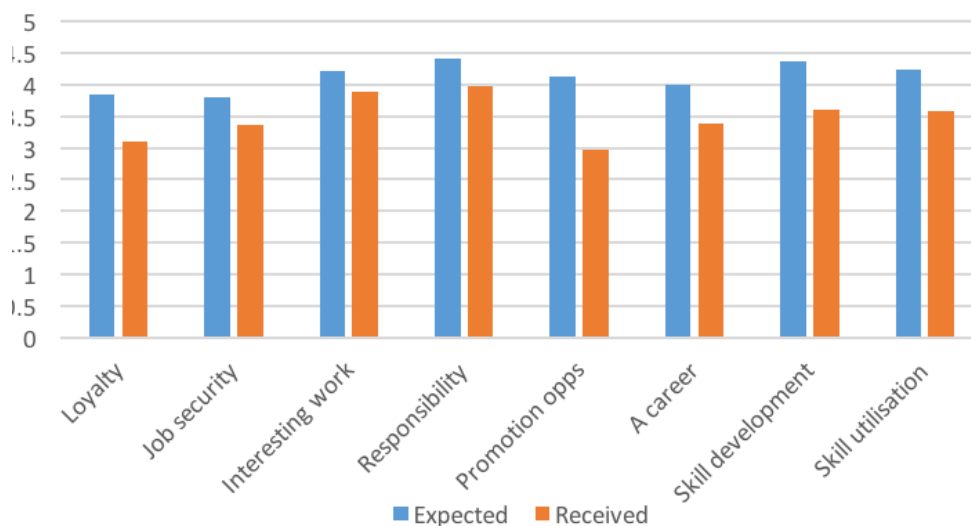


Figure 3 Participant expectations of study variables versus those received

Figure 3 shows certain expectations that employees expect will be provided from their university with responsibility ($\bar{x}=4.41$), skills development ($\bar{x}=4.37$), skill utilisation ($\bar{x}=4.25$),

and interesting work ($\bar{x}=4.22$) being the most important. There was no significant difference between Australia and the UK. It also shows that there is a significant ($p=0.01$) difference between the expectations that these variables will be provided and the provision of each variable.

Discussion

This paper makes five important contributions to the scholarship on the careers of professional staff. Firstly, that in the test variables studied here there is no significant difference between professional staff in Australia or the UK. This is not an unexpected finding in that both countries are culturally similar and that the higher education sector is also run along similar lines including the move from near-free to high tuition fees supported by loans, and a research excellence assessment (Wellings, 2015). The continued rise in globally mobile professional staff, especially at senior level, between the two countries should mean that there should be little shock to the system.

Secondly, that the participants of this study were very well qualified, obviously investing a considerable amount of time and effort in increasing their level of qualifications. Working in the higher education sector, it is not surprising that participants value learning and gaining formal qualifications. Not only do most staff enter the profession at graduate level, many job adverts now ask for management qualifications at postgraduate level. The fact that more UK staff had masters degrees could be due to the difference in structure of undergraduate degrees between the two countries. However, there are more participants with doctorates in the UK compared with Australia and it is not immediately apparent why this might be so, or what effect this may have on the profession. Is the continued rise of third-space or blended professionals increasing at a higher rate in the UK than Australia for instance (Veles and Carter 2016; Whitchurch 2009)?

Thirdly, that there are some key expectations from their roles, that is high levels of responsibility, skill development, skill utilisation, and interesting work. This relates closely to the new contemporary career orientations of protean and boundaryless careers with scholars arguing that employees are now more motivated by attitudes such as value match, interesting and challenging work, and interesting work (that is intrinsic motivators) compared with more traditional careers which include motivators such as promotion, pay and job security (extrinsic motivators; Arthur 2014; Briscoe and Hall 2006 [see Table 1]). The data also shows that most staff were employed in their roles for less than five years, even if they had been in their universities much longer than this. This may point to the need to move around to ensure ongoing challenge and interesting work. This may also indicate that they are, at least in part, showing evidence of a boundaryless career (Table 1)

Fourthly, that the results from this study show that although participants reported that the intrinsic motivators were the most important, the extrinsic motivators were not unimportant. In fact, the data shows that the gap between expected promotion opportunities and those received (or perceived), was the largest. The data also showed that in the UK the majority of staff were looking for a promotion within the next three years. This supports the data found in previous studies that suggest that the lack of promotion opportunities is an area of dis-satisfaction for staff (LFHE, 2010; Strachan et al., 2012). This may indicate that professional staff have an integrated approach to expressing their own meaning of career success, integrating both traditional, extrinsic desires with more contemporary, intrinsic ones. This could be argued to be a sensible approach for professional staff who work for large organisations with jobs being graded (compared with people e.g. the higher education role

analysis (HERA) process in the UK), and vacancies being created only through staff movement (in general). For staff to continue to be challenged, perhaps being promoted is one way to achieve this, and working for a large third-sector organisation may lead one to expect e.g. job security to a certain degree. Additionally, professional staff value intrinsic motivators which leads to overall satisfaction, and are non-negotiable requirements from their employer.

Fifthly, that although there seems to be a lack of alignment between expectations and benefits received, professional staff are satisfied in their jobs with positive views towards the organisation. However, it also highlights that concurrently with being satisfied and holding positive views, the participants also have negative affect emotions in the week before when they completed the study. A previous study has shown that mood affects job satisfaction in the short- but not long-term (Judge and Ilies 2004), so it could be argued that when professional staff were asked about their mood (questions included e.g. did you feel gloomy, tense, worried and so on), that negative emotions could be present but they still reported a high level of satisfaction, as their current short-term mood did not impact on their long-term satisfaction levels.

To conclude, professional staff have high levels of job satisfaction, are intrinsically motivated by responsibility, skill development, skill utilisation, and interesting work, but also with needs for a promotion opportunities and a career. Understanding this integrated approach to career motivation should allow employers to provide enhanced career services to professional staff.

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