

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL CAREERS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

**ALISON WILD**  
**ASSOCIATION OF HEADS OF UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION**  
**AND**  
**EWART WOOLDRIDGE, CBE**  
**LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Leadership  
Foundation**  
for Higher Education



## **Acknowledgements**

This is the first report of the sector working group on professional careers in higher education, whose members were:

- Alison Wild, Chair of AHUA and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Admin) and University Secretary, Liverpool John Moores University
- Jon Baldwin, Registrar Warwick University and AHUA Regional Convener (Midlands)
- Donald Beaton, University Secretary, Kingston University
- Professor Jose Chambers, Chair of ODHE network and Assistant Vice Chancellor, the University of Winchester
- Dr Lynne Gornall, Centre for Enterprise, University of Glamorgan
- Sheila Gupta, Chair of UPA and Director of Human Resources, University of Edinburgh
- Dr John Hogan Registrar, Newcastle University and Treasurer AUA
- Alison Robinson, Executive Director of AUA
- Maureen Skinner, Chair of AUA Chair and Registrar, Faculty of the Arts, Thames Valley University
- Bob Thackwray, Director, Membership and Organisational Development, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
- Catherine Webb, Executive Secretary, AHUA
- Ewart Wooldridge, Chief Executive, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

The group is particularly grateful to John Lauwerys, previously Registrar of the University of Southampton, for his report at Appendix A, based on the 34 interviews, which he conducted in UK HEIs with a representative group of staff of varying seniority across a wide range of kinds of professional roles.

**Alison Wild**

AHUA

**Ewart Wooldridge**

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

**First published in March 2009**

**Leadership Foundation for Higher Education**

**E: [info@lfhe.ac.uk](mailto:info@lfhe.ac.uk)**

**[www.lfhe.ac.uk](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk)**

**© Leadership Foundation for Higher Education**

**All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the copywrite owner.**

**Printed in the United Kingdom**

# Contents

## Sector Working Group on Professional Careers in Higher Education

– First Report to the Sector	5
<b>Appendix A : The context of the project</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Background	11
2. Introduction	11
3. Methodology	12
4. Themes and issues arising from the interviews	13
• Overview	13
• Educational and Professional qualifications	14
• How did those interviewed come to be working in HE?	14
• The nature of the jobs performed by the interview group	17
• How have those in the interview group progressed their careers?	18
• What do those interviewed feel about working in the HE sector?	21
• What do they hope for in the future and will they want to stay in the HE sector?	22
5. Conclusions and lessons to be learned	24
6. Common success factors for further promoting good practice	25
• Recruitment	25
• Developing staff	26
• Professional and educational qualifications	27
7. Proposals for consideration to address some of the issues identified through the report	27



# **Sector Working Group on Professional Careers in Higher Education**

## **First Report to the Sector - March 2009**

This working group, comprising representatives of key professional associations across higher education has recently completed the first phase of its work. It is chaired by Alison Wild PVC (Administration) & University Secretary, Liverpool John Moores University, and Chair of AHUA) and co-ordinated by Ewart Wooldridge (Chief Executive of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education). It is utilising a combination of research, survey work and debate to test out a number of assumptions about the evolving critical role of professional staff and leaders in higher education and their career paths. At the same time, the group is mindful that the whole concept of a 'career' is undergoing change and employment opportunities now often lead to the accumulation of a mixed portfolio rather than following a linear 'career' progression.

### **1. Key messages**

- 1.1 The role of professional administrative and support staff is becoming more pivotal as the sector becomes more competitive, more business and market focussed, and more international.
- 1.2 Recent research has pointed to new, innovative areas of collaboration between academic and professional staff - the old divide between academic and "non-academic" is starting to change.
- 1.3 Whilst increased professionalisation is making a very positive contribution to standards of delivery and service, it does have inherent dangers through the creation of professional 'silos' around particular professional disciplines.
- 1.4 It is time to think afresh about the professional career in universities, to ensure that professional and support staff and managers 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. There is a growing perception (confirmed by a number of the individuals interviewed in this project) that internal candidates feel they are missing out on qualifying for top professional roles which are being filled by senior players from other sectors.'
- 1.5 These key messages have come out of the first phase of the working group's work, which has involved interviews and case studies of 34 individuals at various stages of their professional careers across higher education.

### **2. Work plan**

The working group sees this as an incremental process, taking issues and perspectives one-by-one. Those phases are:

The 34 case studies of individual perceptions of careers in higher education. Key points from this set of case studies are summarised below.

Blending these perceptions with the completed research by Dr Celia Whitchurch of the Institute of Education for the Leadership Foundation on Professional Leadership in HE.<sup>1</sup>

A survey of institutional perspectives to see how the issues raised by individuals are perceived by those within HEIs who are responsible for managing them.

In addition to these initiatives, the group is also undertaking developing a specification for an assessment of the labour market for professional staff and managers, (eg pointers on skilling, market size, opportunities, mobility etc) looking at practice from other sectors and keeping in touch with the views of key stakeholders such as UUK and the funding councils who are themselves looking at the various aspects which relate to the development of the HE workforce.

### **3. Perceptions of individual professionals**

In-depth interviews were held with 34 professionals across UK institutions at various stages of their career, carried out by John Lauwerys, who had previously been Registrar and Secretary at the University of Southampton. The key issues and lessons that come out of that report are as follows:

- The interviewees were a very well qualified group of people who continue to take advantage of continuing professional development opportunities
- For most, coming into HE was not part of a long-term planned choice to join the sector – more of an ‘accidental’ event.
- Most found what they considered to be a less-than-clear picture presented by their prospective HEI employer of the nature of the organisation and the career opportunities.
- All saw HE as a worthwhile sector with good values
- Salary and conditions were less significant than job security and work satisfaction in terms of their positive views about the sector. Many had come in with specific specialisms. Fewer were the classic ‘generalists’ who would have come in at the beginning of their careers to be trainees in university administration, aiming to end up as Registrars.
- Most felt that they had had to manage their own career development and progress themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Whitchurch, C. (2008). *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures Final Report*. Research and Development Series. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

- Development opportunities from visiting conferences, working on projects within the UK and abroad, were found to be valuable.
- Many had found career development opportunities arising from re-organisation, but few had had those opportunities as a result of structured career development programmes. Most said that they wished to stay in higher education on a long-term basis, many found their advancement limited by the creation of professional silos and a perceived tendency for the very top jobs to be filled directly by outside appointments from other sectors.

#### **4. Common success factors**

Learning points for institutions in response to success factors positively commented on by the interviewees were as follows:

- At the recruitment point, providing more information about the real benefits of working in the sector and the sense of a worthwhile career in important institutions.
- Some clearer pathways, which might in some cases develop into some form of graduate training scheme.
- Avoiding job titles that are too narrow, that themselves contribute to the creation of 'silos'.
- Providing more help with developing career management skills, although acknowledging that career planning was an individual's responsibility.
- Providing opportunities to broaden experience through attendance at conferences, internal exchanges, mentoring, secondments and project work.
- Acknowledging the importance of career development and internal experience as a key factor fitting individuals for the top jobs- needing to be underpinned, by a sound succession planning policy that is based on nurturing the institutions own talent.
- Enabling staff to take full opportunity to pursue further professional and educational qualifications relevant to their own expertise and the leadership of higher education.

#### **5. Research**

The parallel research undertaken by Dr Celia Whitchurch on Professional Careers in HE, for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, brings out a number of key points:

1. Professional roles may differ, particularly in the way they are perceived by the holders: some are very 'bounded' within the discipline, others involve much more 'cross-boundary' work, other still are even more cross-cutting

'boundless' and yet others find themselves in 'hybrid' roles that are new creations between academic and professional domains.

2. Celia Whitchurch's report has stimulated an entirely new agenda about the domains between academic and professional leaders in higher education. Crossing boundaries and domains can be a critical factor in facilitating change.

## **6. Questions for debate**

The Working Group hopes that this process of assembling evidence and perceptions will promote an ongoing debate and the kind of questions we would be interested in hearing a response to from professional conferences and other gatherings are:

- i. Is there a danger that increased professionalism and new 'silos' around these disciplines are creating a set of new 'glass ceilings' in higher education?
- ii. Is the way that we are supporting professional staff in institutions giving them sufficient skills, stimulus and opportunity to develop their careers to the highest level?
- iii. How do we compare with other sectors? Could indeed the same critique be made by similar groupings in other parts of the public or private sectors?

## **APPENDIX A**

# **The Development of Careers in the Professional Services in Higher Education in the UK**

*A report based on thirty-four interviews conducted in UK HEIs of a representative group of staff of varying seniority across a whole range of kinds of jobs*

---

## **The context of the project**

Everyone working in the higher education (HE) sector and anyone who has an interest in the development of the higher education system in the UK will be conscious of the enormous changes that have taken place in just one generation. In the course of this period the most obvious change has been from an elite to a mass system which has increased full time student numbers from under half a million to five times that number in less than forty years. And the related increases in staff numbers, financial turnover and scale of the physical estate have likewise been huge. This swift change in scale has been accompanied by enormous changes in the range of activities performed by institutions which now engage with society and the economy in ways that for many institutions were rare even twenty years ago. At the same time the external demands on institutions in terms of accountability and compliance have grown manyfold.

Taken together these events have created a sector which is almost unrecognisable from its one time character and institutions now rely on staff to perform roles which simply did not exist even in the recent past. What is very clear however is that such changes will continue and may even accelerate in the future. Governments in particular, and society in general, have further ambitions for the enhancement of higher education and a continuing appetite for the benefits the sector can deliver.

These trends create new expectations on the staff working in higher education institutions (HEIs), not least on those in the Professional Services areas. Completely new functions have to be delivered while longer established roles have to be transacted in quite different ways to meet the changed context in which the sector and its institutions operate. Staff who were recruited even just a few years

ago have to adapt to meet these changes while in the current challenging economic climate the need for effectiveness and value for money assume even greater prominence.

It follows that the HE sector and those who work within it need more than ever to be flexible and adept at managing change. The Professional Services staff who are the focus of this study need to accept the ongoing need for personal development to enable them to respond effectively to the continuing challenges they and their institutions are facing. And the HE institutions themselves need to give greater attention to the development of their staff who are their greatest asset and resource. While few would disagree with this perception, there is evidence of a growing trend to recruit highly experienced senior professional staff from outside the HE sector. This might suggest that VCs do not believe there are staff in the sector with the necessary qualities to meet the new challenges their institutions face.

The aim of this project is to draw on the 34 interviews conducted across the sector to identify issues which should be addressed by the sector and its' Professional Services along with exemplars of good practice. This, it is hoped, will make a valuable contribution to addressing the very real challenges described above. It should be recognised however that the perspectives identified through the interviews are those of individuals and that there is a counterbalancing institutional perspective which will inevitably be somewhat different. It would be useful to explore the institutional perspective and narrative to test against the individual views arising from the interviews.

## **1. Background**

This Report was commissioned by AHUA and the Leadership Foundation on behalf of the Steering Group on Professional Careers in HE whose members include representatives of a number of key professional groups in HE including AUA, UPA and the ODHE Network. The Group appointed John Lauwerys, the recently retired secretary and registrar of the University of Southampton, as a consultant to conduct the interviews and produce this Report. The project has been steered by Alison Wild, the chair of AHUA who chairs the Steering Group, and Ewart Wooldridge, the chief executive of the Leadership Foundation.

## **2. Introduction**

2.1 As the consultant responsible for delivering the project, I would like to preface my report by acknowledging the 34 people who agreed to be interviewed, typically for two hours each, and subsequently to review the case study report

and to amend it where necessary. I found those I interviewed to be a fascinating and very able group of people with a real commitment to the progression of their institutions and the purposes of HE. It has been a real privilege to share with them the story of their careers and to learn in confidence of their frustrations, achievements and ambitions.

- 2.2 The sector is very fortunate indeed to have such people working in its universities and colleges and it owes them in turn a duty to help in the realisation of their potential both for their personal benefit but also in the interest of the continuing success HE in the UK.

### **3. Methodology**

- 3.1 In choosing those to be interviewed the aim has been, within the limits of a small sample, to select as wide a variety of people as possible. The original specification was to conduct at least 30 interviews and in practice 34 people were interviewed, drawn from 24 institutions in England, Scotland and Wales. 14 work in post-1992 universities, 18 in pre-1992 universities and two in university colleges. Of the 34 people, 19 are men and 15 women and of the total three are from an ethnic minority background. In terms of seniority 19 of the total are senior staff, 13 middle grade staff and two hold junior posts. The nature of the jobs performed by the whole group spans a wide range of roles performed by those working in the professional services in HE including finance, HR, estates, IT, libraries, learning support, planning, departmental management, business services and marketing, through to the most senior leadership positions.
- 3.2 Across the whole of HE in the UK on the basis of HESA statistics there are in the order of 40,000 people working in the professional services area so just 34 people is indeed a small sample. However the Steering Group is satisfied that with the invaluable help of many senior colleagues across the whole sector it has proved possible to identify as broad and diverse a sample as could be achieved within the limit of this number of interviews.
- 3.3 The same format was followed for each interview. Each interviewee was asked to send a copy of their CV in advance and at the interview explored how their career had developed and what brought them into working in HE. A range of standard questions were used which explored their motivation for

working in HE, the opportunities they had for personal and professional development, their sources (if any) for advice and mentoring, what their career ambitions are and how they see themselves progressing their career. In order to encourage openness and frankness the interviewees were guaranteed that whatever was recorded would be subject to the interviewee's agreement and they have had the opportunity to correct or delete anything written up in the case study report. They were also guaranteed that without their explicit permission only Alison Wild and Ewart Wooldridge would see the reports. The Steering Group knows who has been interviewed but in general the identity of the 34 interviewees is not known.

- 3.4 The 34 interviewees included some who had spent almost all their careers working in HE and sometimes very long periods in just one institution. However a majority had worked in sectors other than just HE with both the public and private sectors equally represented among the group. Most of those interviewed did not know what career they wanted to follow when at school or even university or had an ambition at an early stage that changed or could not be fulfilled. So as a whole the interview group had had experience across a huge variety of other employment sectors but most having once joined an HEI were keen, or at least happy in principle, to progress their careers in the sector. In many cases they were not optimistic that they could progress further often because they felt they lacked sufficiently broad experience and could not see a route through for their career progression. They also detected an enthusiasm to appoint externally to promotion posts. The interview group overwhelmingly felt they had to handle their career progression on their own and only a small number had benefited from good career mentoring and advice.

## **4. Themes and issues arising from the interviews**

### **4.1 Overview**

The following main section of the report draws out the general characteristics of the interview group and seeks to identify issues and themes which emerged from the collective of the interviews. Although the background, specialism, stage of career and seniority of those interviewed is very diverse, certain themes do emerge which in turn are interesting, informative and potentially very significant in the context of identifying ways to enhance the career development of this group of staff. That is an important and worthy

endeavour, not just for the benefit of the individual but also for the furtherance of the aims and ambitions of their employing institutions.

#### **4.2 Educational and professional qualifications**

Between them the study group members possess an impressive range of qualifications. All of them are graduates and/or hold graduate level professional qualifications relevant to the jobs they perform. Almost all entered university employment as graduates although in a few cases a first degree and/or professional qualification(s) had been gained while in employment and in one significant example someone now in a very senior role gained all his qualifications from ONC to MBA while in full time work. In two cases graduate level professional qualifications were achieved through part time study while they were already working in higher education. More than one person has taken a second first degree or a Master's degree for intellectual stimulation rather than for more specific career development purposes. Where further qualifications were pursued while in HE employment, the institution was generally supportive and sometimes offered significant financial help. However in one instance someone with a technician level qualification encountered outright hostility from his Director when he raised the issue of studying for a graduate level professional qualification. As a result he resigned from the university, worked as a consultant for two years while studying for a first degree (with one year's exemption), graduated with a 2:1 and re-entered the sector at another university!

#### **4.3 How did those interviewed come to be working in HE?**

What is striking is how almost accidental entry to employment in the sector has been for those interviewed. Very few people have any idea of the number and variety of jobs that exist in the Professional Services area in higher education so perhaps this isn't surprising. No-one is likely to aspire when at school or university to develop a career in this area and the interview group came to their present jobs in a variety of almost happenstance ways. Some had very clear and quite different early career ambitions. One for example had a place to read Veterinary Medicine but before starting developed a severe allergy to animal hair and then took quite a different degree course which led to a university librarianship post. Another took a degree in Land Management but has ended up working in a university Planning Office. Yet another had the ambition to be an air force pilot but the need in his late teens for vision correction led him to consider a career in Law. Two weeks in

Barristers' Chambers changed his mind (!) and after graduating in Geography he is now very content working in a generalist role in a university.

Entry to university employment as an academic is an obvious career route for those with a real interest in a field of knowledge and who aspire to teach and do research. The route to the Professional Service roles is less obvious and has proved an indirect journey for those in the interview group. A few learned of the prospects through involvement with the student union/JCR while at university, or had a job opportunity brought to their notice by a member of the university staff, sometimes by one who was a relative. In one case the Careers Service at her university provided a talk on job opportunities in universities. In the majority of cases entry to the sector was through an application made in response to a newspaper advertisement, often submitted with little idea of what working in a higher education institution would actually be like. In one or two cases that first job in HE was quite fortuitous. One person had resigned his private sector job, sold the family house and was about to emigrate to Australia when his wife became seriously ill and could not travel. He had to find a new job and almost the first advertised post he saw was in a university from which point he has progressed to a Senior Director post in a second university. In another instance someone, who had a difficult commute to her place of work, used to drive past a university close to her home every day. She sometimes wondered about working there and how much more convenient that would be. She eventually applied successfully for a promotion post in that university in response to an advertisement which caught her eye in one of the professional journals.

In some cases the first job sought in a higher education institution was a matter of convenience rather than a higher level vocational pull. The need to earn a living and the availability of a suitable opportunity at an institution generated an application perhaps in parallel to others into different sectors. Sometimes the motives for an application for a university post in an HEI are more noble. Several of those interviewed talked about seeking a job in a 'worthwhile sector' and more than one person was seeking to move away from the commercial sector. One person said he had hated the cynical context of the company in which he previously worked. A number of people talked about wanting to work in a public sector context, often adding that they found universities preferable to local government or the NHS which they characterised as monolithic and rigid.

In a number of cases a conscious decision was made by both partners in a relationship to relocate to an attractive part of the UK including some of the nicest cities which are in many cases university towns. The possibility of working in a university was sometimes allied to the desire to pursue further study and to be conveniently close to an appropriate institution for this purpose. In two instances the person interviewed had learned about the job vacancy through a relative/spouse already working in the university, a vacancy they conceded which they would not otherwise have known about.

Those who have moved to a university post, often at a very senior level, later in their career seem to have had little more understanding of the real nature and scale of the institutions they were joining than those appointed early in their career. One person said that he was 'very surprised at the nature of the university and that a £100 million business existed in the region without his prior knowledge'. There was evidence from the interviews that the 'headhunting' firms are increasingly influential in attracting people from other sectors, particularly at a senior level, to work in higher education. In a few instances, those entering HE at a mid stage in their career had had to look for a new opportunity following restructuring/redundancy in their previous field of employment.

Perhaps surprisingly salary levels and terms and conditions of service (including the generous final salary pension schemes still the norm in HE employment) were rarely mentioned as significant factors in attracting the people interviewed to work in HE. Some mentioned the reassurance of greater job security compared to other sectors and a few acknowledged they would be able to earn more in the commercial sector, but it was the other factors previously mentioned which made jobs in the HE sector attractive.

Collectively the interview group gave the impression that the institutions to which they had originally applied had made a poor job of explaining the nature of the institution from the Professional Services perspective or what the job for which they were applying was really about. However, almost all those interviewed were very pleased to have gained a job in an HE institution and despite describing some of their frustrations, on balance they wanted to stay in the sector. The terms 'worthwhile', 'interesting' and 'satisfying' were regularly used to characterise their work.

#### 4.4 **The nature of the jobs performed by the interview group**

About half of those interviewed could be described as specialists in the sense that they had already chosen to develop a specialist career route, had undertaken professional training to that end and had already worked in such a role with a previous employer. This covered fields such as finance, personnel work, estates functions, IT/computing and librarianship. Others in the group did not necessarily have extensive prior experience in the area of their current post prior to appointment, but were appointed to carry out a well defined specific role.

It was evident that many of the jobs performed by those interviewed were of recent creation and reflect the explosion over the last decade or two in new roles in higher education. Some of those recruited to these transitional jobs are, as Celia Whitchurch (*Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures, Final Report, November 2008*) has identified, working in new areas which span the middle ground between traditional academic and Professional Service (or, as would have been described previously, administrative) roles. So areas such as learning support, outreach work and the exploitation of intellectual property have brought new kinds of people into new kinds of roles in our institutions.

In the case of three of those interviewed a transition has been made in their career track away from an academic role into a clear Professional Services function. One of the factors that prompted them to seek this change was the increasing demand on academics to engage in the research agenda and to produce results which add to their institution's research standing. The three did not find the research aspect of their academic role especially appealing and were more interested in the learning and teaching agenda. That in turn led them into roles which were no longer as mainstream academics and ultimately they moved fully across into a Professional Service role and in each case to a more senior post in their institution.

Those who saw themselves first and foremost as professional specialists in areas such as finance, which are found across all sectors, were most likely to regard working in a university as one phase of their career rather than being the sector in which they necessarily wished to remain. In some instances such specialists suggested that if they remained too long in the HE sector they

would find it very difficult to move on, into for example the commercial sector, as they would not be seen to be 'in touch' any longer. By contrast some of these professional specialists in the interview group were content to stay in the HE sector and had already advanced their career significantly within the sector.

Another group were in a very different context although they evidently represent a much smaller proportion of those working in the Professional Services in HE than used to be the case. These are the classic generalists who enter university employment typically within a few years of graduation and begin to develop an expertise in areas which are particularly to do with the sector. These jobs are traditionally associated with the areas under the Academic Registrar and the Registry or in departmental/school support (or their equivalent titles). The generalist route used to provide a promising career and could lead up to the post of Registrar or equivalent. There are still elements of this group within all universities but here too there are sub-specialisms and this trend has worked against progression to more senior roles because people are then seen to lack the breadth of experience necessary to reach the highest offices.

So the emerging picture is of great differentiation. There are specialists doing very similar jobs to those found in many other employment sectors. Then there are those who see themselves very much as making their careers in the HE sector and developing and promoting specialist knowledge relevant to such roles. Thirdly there is an increasingly numerous group whose roles are diverse. They are working in universities as part of a changing and developing work portfolio in new transitional and developing areas often at the boundaries of the traditional core units and departments in the sector. Sixteen of the interview group fall into the first category, sixteen in the second category and just two clearly in the third category. That is quite probably not an accurate reflection of the proportion in each category across the whole sector and it is of course sometimes possible for people to switch their category as their careers develop and opportunities for change present themselves.

#### **4.5 How have those in the interview group progressed their careers?**

It was quite striking that almost all those interviewed have very much had to manage their own careers and progress with little, if any, career mentoring and guidance from their institution. This lack of guidance is no doubt common

in other sectors but less so in the public sector such as in the Civil Service or NHS. And of course the Armed Services provide a striking example of active career development and management. However even in the private sector, and especially in the larger corporations, there is an oversight of the staff and their career progression not least aimed at planned career succession. One interviewee even said that the interview was the first time he had ever had a chance to discuss his career.

The people in the interview group had, as has already been indicated, in the main entered university employment by happenstance and in the great majority of cases their progress has been very much a matter of their own initiative. So the decision to apply for a different job within or outside their institution was at their own instigation with rarely any suggestion from a senior colleague that they should do so. Likewise other significant career development activities such as visits abroad, conference attendance (except for very specific events related to their present job), opportunities for secondment and so forth were nearly always principally generated by the individual rather than their Senior Manager or institution.

A number said that they had found it difficult to progress their careers and in a few cases felt they were stuck. Some had stayed in the same job for a very significant number of years. One person remained in exactly the same post for twelve years despite wanting to progress. He explained that he had applied for posts elsewhere but his experience looked too narrow and he had no success at that time. Eventually it was the arrival of a new Senior Manager who unlocked the situation by restructuring and offering him a new job which after all those years provided new experience and ultimately led to a promotion job at another university.

While the above describes the experience of the majority, there were some outstandingly better experiences, too. One interviewee has been in the same university for eleven years and has progressed through seven jobs from the most junior grade to being one of the most senior people in his university's Professional Services. And in only one case did he have to apply formally for the post to which he was appointed. In regard to the other job changes the institution, particularly through the active management of the Head of Professional Services, moved him to new roles and give him greater responsibility in recognition of his ability and achievements *and* to meet the

operational needs of the university. This would not be an abnormal situation in the Civil Service or in a major corporate sector employer but is very rare in the university sector.

On a less dramatic scale other examples were given where senior colleagues provided encouragement and guidance to those seeking to progress their careers. In a number of instances this included a head of service (often the Registrar in an old university) exercising benevolent patronage to help individuals broaden their experience and develop their careers by enabling them to move to a different job.

There were other ways described to me by which careers had progressed. A restructuring exercise, often following the arrival of a new Vice-Chancellor or other senior appointee, inevitably causes anxiety and has the potential to alter jobs in a way that could be disadvantageous to individuals. However I heard of a significant number of cases where restructuring in the institution had unlocked new opportunities and had proved beneficial to career development.

Not surprisingly moving jobs to another institution had proved very beneficial to career development but equally this proved the case where people moved to a different job in the same institution. Sometimes this meant a sideways move in grade/salary terms but even without promotion a job move proved very important to career progression. In some instances moves between institutions were very difficult to bring about because of the paucity of openings elsewhere and sometimes because personal/family responsibilities ruled out a job at another more distant HEI. In the context of such domestic responsibilities, examples were given of commendable flexibility being exercised by HEIs which had enabled individuals to combine such responsibilities with the furtherance of their careers.

There were other factors which had assisted career progression that were mentioned. In a number of cases the opportunity to 'act up' during the illness of a senior colleague or to stand in for someone on maternity leave had provided invaluable experience of working in a different area or a higher level. One interviewee described how standing in for a senior colleague during some months of sickness absence provided her with fantastic experience and brought her into contact with much more senior people in the university and led her to be recognised as someone with the potential to work at a senior

level. Two interviewees reported that promotion followed when the university advertised nationally to fill a post, had a poor response and failed to make an appointment. In these instances someone internally (not originally a candidate for the post) was asked to take on the more senior role and proved successful in so doing.

Other very positive development experiences which had certainly assisted promotion and appointment to new jobs included a two months' overseas study visit and in another case the award of a Fulbright Scholarship. Involvement in national focus groups and membership of sector committees and participation in the Top Management Programme were also recognised as important ways of profile raising and increasing the likelihood of promotion or appointment to a senior post elsewhere.

In the case of the interviewees who held more senior posts, there was plenty of evidence of engagement with headhunters. Perhaps not surprisingly this was particularly the case with those who had come into HE from another sector but there were three examples in the interview group of headhunters approaching people already in the sector (and therefore theoretically known to the sector!) and this leading to their appointment to a post at another university. Certainly the growth over the last ten years in the role of headhunters in the filling of senior appointments across a broad range of Professional Services posts has been enormous. In the 1990s it was still very rare for them to be involved in such appointments but it has now become almost the norm. Research might reveal that this has led to more senior appointments being made from outside the HE sector. Clearly such firms have a database which includes people from many different sectors and they can more easily demonstrate their added value if they bring forward candidates not known within the sector.

#### **4.6 What do those interviewed feel about working in the HE sector?**

The overwhelming view expressed was very positive about working in the sector, especially in terms of being part of a worthwhile endeavour. The Professional Services staff identified with the values of higher education and recognised the importance to individuals and society as a whole of the teaching, research and outreach work in which the institutions engaged. Although few were directly involved in these activities they knew perfectly well that their contribution was an essential part of the delivery of the whole

agenda. And it was this 'worthwhileness' which differentiated for many working in HE compared to the other sectors, especially those who had previously worked in the commercial sector. As one interviewee put it, after having worked very successfully for five years in a very thrusting company, he felt in need of a more socially worthwhile job.

There were other benefits that were identified in regard to working in the sector. The jobs were often very interesting and varied, the work environment was generally pleasant, the terms and conditions were favourable and institutions were often more flexible in regard to working practices (e.g. allowing a change to part time working) than was found in other employment. Several people referred to their enjoyment of working with academics. As one put it, 'there is real academic rigour brought to debate but sometimes an extraordinary lack of common sense too!' However not everyone was positive about the academic/Professional Services relationship and two of the interviewees clearly regarded themselves as less favoured members of their institution. One of these said that he found the low esteem given to those working in the professional areas, particularly by academics, depressing. He added, 'in universities you are simply viewed as an overhead'.

Nobody indicated that they were keen to move out of the sector and the least favourable view was that other sectors such as local government or the NHS would be worse in which to work. And by contrast a significant number indicated they really enjoyed their job, hard though it might be at times, and that they were very pleased to be working in a higher education institution. A number mentioned relative job security as an important factor.

#### **4.7 What do they hope for in the future and will they want to stay in the HE sector?**

The issue of career progression and ambition for the future were issues explored with all the interviewees. A minority were not particularly ambitious or had no clear ideas of how they hoped to develop their career. Several, all women, referred to their family responsibilities. As one put it, she was uncertain about how ambitious she was in career terms but certainly would not sacrifice her children's needs to those of her career. Her current post is part time and at a less senior level than the job she had at a different university before she married and had children.

The majority, both women and men, were ambitious to develop their careers. In some cases this was in the context of higher education but for others this was not seen to present the opportunities they sought. Few had been given any indication from a senior colleague of how their career might develop and most felt it would be very much up to them to look for the next opportunity whether internally, at another HEI or indeed outside the sector.

There was considerable evidence among the interview group of people working in specialist roles, sometimes quite narrowly focussed. While this sometimes gave an early opportunity for advancement in recognition of the employing institution's need for that specialism, once the individual reached a certain level they seemed to be trapped within that specialist area and not to be appropriately qualified to move to a broader more senior post. This process of working in a silo (which might be called siloisation) and then finding that the limit of advancement is to the top of that silo, is clearly a significant issue. It limits the career progression of able people and reduces the pool of people seen to be appropriately qualified and experienced to advance to the most senior roles. A significant number of those interviewed saw this as a problem. One senior person who had always worked in universities in the planning/government area commented that perhaps his 'business' experience is not sufficiently strong in the context of what is currently sought for the newer style chief operating officer. Another, who has very successfully developed to the top of her specialist area at Senior Director level, recognises the need for the sector to help people in her position to gain broader experience so that they can progress out of their specialist area.

A number of those interviewed felt that higher education institutions were biased against their own existing staff when it came to making senior appointments. As one put it who is in his second senior university role after fifteen years of a successful career in the commercial sector, 'I find it strange that universities seem not to believe in the people already working for them and that they constantly seem to 'buy in' from outside the sector.' Another who held a Director post at a university had expected a new opportunity to open up when following reorganisation a new post of PVC for External Relations was established. However she wasn't even invited to apply and the post went to an external applicant with an academic background but with far less direct experience. The interviewee has since applied for PVC posts elsewhere but it seemed she was regarded as too specialised. As she put it,

'universities don't understand that there is a specialism in the management of processes and people.'

By contrast there were some splendid examples of people being able to grow and develop their careers in HE, most especially through the development opportunities provided by an enlightened senior leader in the institution. As one interviewee said of a now retired Registrar who had been in that mould, he had 'the ability to find raw talent and turn it into real talent.' He accepted that this was the exception however and posed the question of how to display the opportunities there are to promising individuals in order to encourage good people to stay in the sector.

The overall conclusion is that the great majority of the interview group want to stay on and develop their careers in the sector but for most it is far from clear whether, and how, they will be able to do so. Indeed some seemed fatalistic on this issue and have concluded that they will not be able to achieve significant advancement within the sector and will have to look to other sectors for further career progression. But even for those who are confident about past achievements and optimistic about future prospects within the sector the future direction of their careers is completely unclear.

## **5. Conclusions and lessons to be learned**

The overall impression gained from the 34 interviews is positive and if the information drawn out from the group is reflected across the whole sector it gives considerable reassurance about the quality and capability of the Professional Services staff working in HEIs. But can valid overarching conclusions be drawn from a series of in depth interviews with just over thirty people from the thousands working across the whole of higher education in the UK? Well clearly not, even though every attempt was made to choose as diverse and representative group as possible drawn from 24 quite different institutions (about one in eight of the HEIs in the UK). What the interviews can do is to draw out issues and themes as outlined above which might in turn be tested with groups of staff in individual institutions or within particular groups across the whole sector. And that in turn will reveal the validity of what has emerged from the interviews.

In brief, on the basis of the interviews, it can be concluded that HEIs through a variety of ways have managed to recruit people of considerable ability and potential who on the whole are very positive about working in Higher Education institutions. However, with some notable exceptions, there is little evidence that HEIs are developing or releasing the full potential of these staff. All too often they are left to take their own careers forward and fulfil their ambitions and potential on their own with little or no guidance. That cannot be the best way to release the full talent available to HE institutions, something which in increasingly competitive and challenging times must surely be a high priority for all leaders in the sector.

At the same time there is anecdotal evidence that the field of good candidates for the most senior jobs is limited and that it is often difficult to make a good appointment. Clearly no sensible person would argue that *all* senior appointments should be made from within the sector; it is healthy to introduce people into senior teams who have developed their careers in other sectors. However conversely something is wrong if the great majority of senior appointments in the Professional Services are made from outside the HE sector. And what does one say to one senior person in the interview group who agreed he should now be aspiring to the most senior job in his professional area in another university but who said: 'I feel that VCs are looking for senior candidates from the private sector (to whom they are willing to pay a very high salary) and I just don't meet that bill'.

Is the sector scoring an own goal in this regard and should we not do much more on a co-operative basis between institutions to correct this situation?

## **6. Common success factors arising from the interview groups' experience and proposals for further promoting good practice aimed at recruiting and developing high performance Professional Services staff**

### **6.1 Recruitment**

- More thought needs to be given to promoting the very real benefits of working in the sector and to disseminating better information about the many and very worthwhile jobs that exist in HEIs.

- Institutions need to recruit those of the highest ability and potential and this could include active recruitment of their own graduates. Consideration should be given to establishing a graduate trainee scheme as has been done in some institutions for new career entrants.
- While recruitment is likely to be against a particular vacancy and a job specification for that post, institutions should always be conscious of the overriding importance of recruiting people with the potential and drive to learn and take on new and different roles as may be required in the future.
- Thought should be given when devising job titles to avoid inadvertently labelling the job holder as a narrow specialist almost by title unqualified to move to a different role.

## 6.2 **Developing staff**

- Institutions need to work overtly with job holders to plan and develop their careers. Occasionally an individual may not wish to move to a different job but most are likely to have ambitions to progress in their career.
- The development of individual staff should be linked to an institution's succession planning to ensure that key posts can be filled with good staff with the right qualifications and experience.
- Opportunities need to be created for people to broaden their work experience through transfer to different jobs including internal exchanges, temporary moves to cover sickness, maternity leave etc.
- External opportunities for gaining broader experience through secondments and temporary attachments should be identified and promoted.
- Less emphasis should be put on having prior experience in a specific area of work and more on the potential for the growth and development of those who ultimately are more likely to make the most significant contributions to the institution's objectives.
- Encouragement and facilitation should be offered to allow members of staff to engage in external activities including attendance at conference, participation in study visits at home and abroad and engagement in national and external organisations, including membership of committees and working parties.
- Flexibility in work patterns should be facilitated to allow staff to combine the development of their careers and the fulfilment of their potential with short term or permanent domestic and family responsibilities.

### **6.3 Professional and educational qualifications**

- It is very much in the interest of the institution as well as the individual member of staff if the latter pursues further study and qualification(s). Support, both financial and organisational, needs to be offered more extensively to enable and encourage more staff to undertake a whole range of further training and development.
- There should be an expectation that graduate entry staff should have, or plan to take, an appropriate professional qualification or Master's degree broadly relevant to their career in the Professional Services in HE including the AUA CPD framework programme.
- Throughout someone's career in HE there should be an expectation of engagement in continuous professional development either formally or through study visits, guided reading or attendance at appropriate courses/conferences etc.

## **7. Proposals for consideration to address some of the issues identified through the report**

- 7.1 Consider undertaking some research on the number, quality and sectoral background of candidates for senior advertised posts in the professional services in HE.
- 7.2 Identify models of good practice for professional career development in other sectors which might inspire emulation by the HE sector.
- 7.3 Establish what systematic staff and career development structures exist in HE which might serve as good practice models for institutions to consider.
- 7.4 Examine ways of greatly extending mentoring/career development advice to enable everyone seeking such guidance to have access to someone who could provide this role.
- 7.5 Consider with the sector associations how the rigidity of the professional silos could be relaxed to permit/enable broader career development opportunities to be more readily available.

7.6 Facilitate a discussion among the most senior leaders and managers, including VCs, of what the future requirements will be for university professional staff.

---

*John Lauwerys*  
*January 2009*