

The implications of a changing workforce in HE

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Anyone working in higher education over the last decade will have noticed that there has been a marked change in the HE workforce, from one characterised by academic jobs to one with a range of academic and 'professional services' jobs. The term 'professional services' covers marketing, recruitment, and 'the student experience', including careers advice, student welfare and student finance, including student debt. These reflect similar changes in schools and FE over a longer period. Another change has been an increase in teaching-only posts, with separation of teaching and research made more explicit, moving away from traditional academic roles, which combined teaching with research.

These workforce changes have implications for the nature of work and the control over the labour process in HE. They raise fundamental questions about the purpose of education and how it is being delivered.

Very little research has been done on the changing workforce in HE in the UK. In December 2021, the publication of a report by Alison Wolf and Andrew Jenkins *Managers and Academics in a Centralising Sector. The new staffing patterns of UK Higher Education* attempted to address this gap in research. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation with King's College London and the University College London Policy Institute, the report analysed Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data between 2004/5 and 2018/19 and presented six case studies of HE institutions. The research identified two trends: the rise of professional services and the expansion of teaching-only posts.

This article provides an outline of the Wolf and Jenkins report, an account of these changes through the personal experience of working at a post-1992 university, and the results of a recent *PSE* discussion on 26 May 2022 which looked at the implications of a changing workforce for FE and HE.

Wolf and Jenkins contextualise their research in terms of the expansion of the HE sector since the 1990s. HE institutions have become global businesses because of the move away from government formula funding to individual fee-paying students, which has resulted in increased competition for students, especially international students. Fees paid by students are an important income stream, with UK students funded through loans and international students paying individually. A growing emphasis on the 'student experience', together with university league tables and the National Student Survey (NSS) all contribute to a more consumer focus. In parallel, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) every 5-7 years has focused universities on the impact and funding of their research, with an emphasis on publications and research income.

Rise of a professional workforce

The professional workforce has led to the creation of two parallel workforces with different appointment processes, management structures and budgets. These two hierarchies only come together at vice-chancellor level. This new structure has implications for how HE institutions will function in future because it is unclear what the status of the academic workforce will be.

The term 'student experience' has become a driving force in university strategies, and is the basis for the range of professional services. A respondent in the Wolf and Jenkins research said:

'The student experience' is the buzzword here - and has nothing to do with what academics do. Say 'it's about improving the student experience' and they'll go 'Yes, spend the money' (senior manager in central services, pre-1992 university)

Many of these new professional services jobs are highly paid managerial jobs but managing few staff.

There is a lack of professional services expertise in university management. There has been an overall reduction in administrative jobs providing support for lecturers, accompanied by a growing process of centralisation.

My personal experience was that the first step was the introduction of the term 'professional services' to cover administration, quality standards, marketing, international and finance functions. A review of recent job advertisements at the institution reflected these changes, with a wide range of professional services posts advertised, often at managerial level but accompanied by lower paid assistant jobs in marketing, events and teaching support. More recently there has been an increased centralisation of services, with departments losing their own administrators and having to work with faculty or university-wide teams. This makes working relationships more distant.

Teaching only contracts

A second finding of Wolf and Jenkins was the rise of teaching-only contracts, with an increase in an insecure, casualised workforce, similar to the United States and Australia. However, they found that this growth was variable across the sector, influenced by the rate of growth of the university. It was most often found in medicine and business schools. However, counter to expectations, there was a separation across the sector. Since 2005, Russell Group universities showed a big increase in part-time, teaching-only contracts. Non-Russell Group universities showed an increase in full-time, teaching-only contracts, often with permanent or open-ended contracts. Qualitative research interviews with managers showed that there had not been a conscious decision to adopt 'teaching-only' contracts.

This pattern was reflected in a post-1992 institution. Over the last two decades there has been a gradual increase in an insecure, casualised workforce, characterised by hourly-paid lecturers and short-term contracts, responsible for teaching only. A couple of years ago, the Business School introduced teaching fellows, which allowed many hourly-paid lecturers to move into more permanent posts. The use of teaching fellows has gradually spread across the university. In the short term, the introduction of teaching fellows was seen as an improvement in pay, terms and conditions, but the lack of time to develop research limits the career prospects in more secure academic posts.

The impact of the pandemic and introduction of hybrid (on-line and face-to-face) teaching has impacted on the type of support staff available for lecturers. What was previously an IT support team has now become a team of teaching support assistants for the delivery of lectures and tutorials, on-line and face-to-face. This can be seen as a positive development for IT support, but it may have implications for teaching staff, because they may be expected to take on bigger workloads.

What is the function of a university?

Exploring the implications of these changes, Wolf and Jenkins (2021) looked at some of the drivers of decision-making in universities. A core management concern is the matching of staff numbers to student numbers, reflecting the increasingly competitive environment and the dependence on student fees. Teaching loads and student recruitment levels are considered key productivity-related interventions. This has led to larger classes, increased workloads, and less contact time per student. Many universities pursue good NSS results because they influence student recruitment. Lecturers are effectively assessed by their NSS results. Lecturers face another pressure as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessments. They are expected to generate funding for research, which makes significant contributions to university core costs. However, in contrast to teaching and research, professional services have no measure of productivity and do not bring specific income to their institutions.

In the US, where insecure teaching posts have been characteristic of universities for many years, the percentage of faculty working part-time or the percentage without tenure is associated with a reduction in graduation rates. The quality of pay, contracts and working conditions is directly related to the quality of services provided. This relationship is found in many other public services, for example social care.

Wolf and Jenkins conclude that student satisfaction provides the rationale for professional services jobs but there is a lack of expertise in professional services, at senior management level, in universities. There is a growing centralisation of services in HE. There has been a decline in traditional academic jobs and an increase in teaching-only jobs, but this is not experienced evenly across the sector. Their overall conclusion is that more attention is needed on internal organisation and the governance of universities.

Workforce changes reflect more than changing governance

Marketisation in schools, FE and HE has led to an increased focus on income and surpluses rather than looking at what students learn and their skills development and understanding. The narrowness of measuring productivity for teaching staff in terms of student numbers and workloads has resulted in increased class sizes and less teaching time. In contrast to teaching staff, the productivity of professional services is only seen in terms of the 'student experience', often leading to grade inflation. The lack of expertise among senior university managers in how to assess what professional services are required makes the justification for spending money on this workforce less rigorous, with little standardisation of what pay, qualifications and experience are needed, as opposed to what the market dictates.

The implications of these workforce changes relate to the nature of work and changing forms of worker control, especially technical surveillance. How hybrid teaching provision will affect teaching in future is unclear. The involvement of private companies in developing hybrid resources for teaching has expanded during the pandemic. The separation of specific professional services already makes it likely that some functions, for example marketing, could be outsourced. The outsourcing of catering, cleaning and security services is contested in many universities, with services now being taken back in-house.

The growing body of evidence about how part-time, insecure work affects the quality of education provided should be more widely publicised. Unions have done very little work on the changing workforce, and schools and FE/HE unions have not developed any joint campaigns, yet all levels of education have been subjected to marketisation, competition, and new management structures.

These changes in educational workforces at school, FE and HE levels will continue. As a way of developing solidarity, staff could develop horizontal links across institutions, to share information and experiences. These might develop into shadow institutions resisting the marketisation of education. As a counter to narrow measures of productivity, more information about where students go and what they achieve after leaving HE could provide examples of success, not narrowly defined by income and status. Making links with students who are dissatisfied with the productivist nature of education, for example economics students

demanding teaching that promotes alternatives to markets and competition, would help to expand networks of resistance.

Reference

Wolf, A. and Jenkins, A. (2021) *Managers and Academics in a Centralising Sector. The new staffing patterns of UK Higher Education*, KCL, UCL The Policy Institute and Nuffield Foundation, December 2021.

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