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Senior Professional Leaders in Higher Education: the role of prestige

Final report

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Executive Summary

As higher education in the UK moves away from collegial forms of management to more obviously corporate styles of management (Deem et al 2007), staff at the highest levels are often required to be strategic leaders managing complex institutional change. The core activities of universities - teaching and research – are now managed at institution level in response to external demands such as REF, NSS and now TEF. Increasingly, then, senior staff are making decisions at high levels of the organisation that stray into long-established, academic territory: traditionally the preserve of collegial decision-making by academic staff. New types of ‘third space professionals’ (Whitchurch 2008) are moving into senior management (e.g. Registrars, COOs and Secretaries), often with high levels of credibility and influence.

This project focused on senior professional leaders mainly from ‘non-academic’ backgrounds (we use scare quotes as it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between academic and non-academic backgrounds; also as it is increasingly a contested term (Szekeres 2011)) who are leading contemporary universities in this complex context. We posed the following research questions:

- What are the career trajectories of senior professional leaders in contemporary universities and how do they describe their professional identities, expertise and capabilities?
- How do gender, ethnicity, age and other characteristics influence the careers of senior professional leaders, and how do these intra-act with networks and indicators of esteem?
- How do the values of senior professional leaders fit higher education organisational cultures and structures?
- What are senior professional leaders’ perceptions of the value placed on these indicators of esteem by institutional and professional colleagues?

We focused in this project on the professionals who have made it to the top levels of their institutions by interviewing 30 senior professional staff at Chief Operating Officer/Registrar/Secretary level across England and Scotland. We asked them about their career trajectories, how they gained credibility in their roles, and the crossing of academic/administrative boundaries at the level of senior professional leaders. The interviews lasted between half an hour to nearly two hours, and most took place in the interviewee’s own office. We also invited them to draw concept maps that illustrated how they would describe the key characteristics of their roles.

The findings are presented in three sections, covering: career progression routes; the credibility of senior professional leaders; and interpretations of their role. Although (as is reflected in the title of the project) we started the research with an interest in prestige, given our previous research on prestige in academic careers (Coate, K. and Kandiko Howson 2016; Kandiko Howson, C., Coate, K. and de St Croix, T. 2017), we quickly found that this is not a term that has currency amongst non-academic leaders (at least not in the way it does for academic staff). We therefore began to use the term ‘credibility’ more than ‘prestige’, although in fact it was clear that some of our interviewees were quite prestigious professionals.

However, the term credibility was more comfortable for the majority of our interviewees, and one of the key themes that emerged is that credibility comes through the abilities to see the ‘big picture’ (the whole institution and beyond) and to ‘get things done’. Often, participants described how they accrued, over time, recognition for having solved particularly intractable problems. These ‘markers of esteem’ would include making decisions that saved the university substantial sums of money, ‘sorting out’ a particularly problematic area of the institution, and in general ‘fixing things’ (which was a very commonly used term).

In exploring the types of leadership skills that those from a ‘non-academic’ background described, it was clear to see that there is quite a big cultural gap between traditional academic pathways to senior leadership, and ‘non-academic’ pathways, which increasingly include leaders who have non-HE backgrounds. Although it is widely noted in the literature (see Whitchurch 2017) that academic and professional services staff are working more in partnership with each other than ever before, the very large differences between their identity formation, career trajectories and motivations are very apparent, and

were often discussed in the interviews. At the most senior levels of the university, with very high stakes decision-making taking place in fairly small leadership teams, it seems worthy of note that one of the key aspects of the job of these 'non-academic' leaders is to manage their relationships with academics, and we illustrate in this report how they describe this part of their role. Also, given the very rich range of metaphors that participants used to describe their role, we have included a final findings section on the ways in which they interpreted their jobs.

We finish the report with some conclusions and recommendations, and details about dissemination plans.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Society for Research into Higher Education for supporting this research. The research team learned a great deal from conducting this research, and hope it helps grow relationships between the higher education research and higher education professional communities.

We received immensely valuable insight from members of our Steering Group for the project:

- Steve Woodfield, Kingston University and SRHE critical friend of the project
- Celia Whitchurch, UCL Institute of Education
- Brigid McClure, Deputy COO Arts & Sciences, King's College London

We warmly thank them for their time, insights and recommendations for further reading. It was extremely helpful to have our research informed by current research and practice developments.

We thank the Association for University Administrators (AHUA) who assisted us with reaching out to their network and for providing dissemination opportunities.

We also thank both the Society and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education which funded previous research which this project built upon.

Finally, we thank our interviewees who generously gave their time to participate in this research project. We thank them for their open and candid accounts and for providing insights into the role of senior professional leaders.

Context

Much of the literature on higher education management in the UK context notes the rise of 'managerialism' and the corresponding move away from collegial forms of management (e.g. Deem et al 2007; Shattock 2013). What is clear is that senior managers at the highest levels of the university are often required to be strategic leaders managing complex institutional change. The core activities of universities - teaching and research - are now managed at an institutional level in response to external demands such as REF and TEF. Additional compliance demands require new processes to be put in place in complex environments (e.g. CMA, UKVI Tier 4 Visa regulations and Prevent). Many of these demands require decision-making on high-stakes issues that could land the university in legal or financial difficulties.

In this context, senior teams (of academic and non-academic staff) are increasingly making decisions that stray into long-established, academic territory (e.g. policies on attendance monitoring). Some of these decisions would traditionally have been the preserve of collegial decision-making by academic staff. This increased erosion between the academic-professional services divide has generated much literature over the past decade (e.g. Gordon and Whitchurch's 2010 edited volume on academic and professional services staff in universities). Of particular interest has been the identification of 'third space professionals' (Whitchurch 2008) who cross academic and professional services boundaries. A decade on from Whitchurch's initial research project, we can see that these professionals are now moving into senior management (e.g. Registrars, COOs and Secretaries), often with high levels of credibility and influence.

The identification of new, boundary-crossing professional services staff in the contemporary higher education context has been insightful in terms of understanding changes in how universities are managed (e.g. Middlehurst 2010). However, for those progressing through 'non-academic' routes into senior, blended roles, there are interesting questions to be explored about how these leaders have developed their credibility, particularly when leading change within and making decisions within the historically academic-dominated space. Furthermore, although Whitchurch's research has brought some visibility to how senior professional leaders position and advance their careers, over the past decade a clear professional identity of this group has not visibly emerged.

This project therefore focused on senior professional leaders mainly from 'non-academic' backgrounds (although note that we have some difficulty with the term 'non-academic' (Szekeres 2011)) who are leading contemporary universities in this complex context. We posed the following research questions:

- What are the career trajectories of senior professional leaders in contemporary universities and how do they describe their professional identities, expertise and capabilities?
- How do gender, ethnicity, age and other characteristics influence the careers of senior professional leaders, and how do these intra-act with networks and indicators of esteem?
- How do the values of senior professional leaders fit higher education organisational cultures and structures?
- What are senior professional leaders' perceptions of the value placed on these indicators of esteem by institutional and professional colleagues?

In an attempt to move beyond individual accounts of progression, we have explored what motivates senior professional leaders, the nature of their expertise, what they value in their careers, and what they feel is valued/esteemed by their colleagues. We decided to use the lens of 'prestige' and the 'prestige economy' to explore what is individually and collectively valued and prized, given our previous research on the influence of prestige factors in the progression of academic careers (Kandiko Howson et al 2017; Coate and Kandiko Howson 2016). As we go on to discuss, 'prestige' was not a term that resonated with participants when describing their careers in the same way as it does when describing academic careers. However it has been possible to illuminate some of the networks, indicators of esteem and markers of credibility of these senior professional leaders, which have been helpful in defining the characteristics of this distinct professional group. We have also gained insight into changes that might inform the

management of universities, particularly in terms of how senior professional staff gain credibility with academic staff. These insights will hopefully inform leadership development programmes for senior leaders, which have been found to be largely ineffective to date (Dopson et al 2016).

Some of the third space professionals who achieve success at the highest levels and have gained credibility with both academic and professional services staff have also gained esteemed external reputations. Whitchurch (2008) observed that “achieving credibility in the third space...appears to depend increasingly on an individual being able to build their profile in the local situation” (p. 31), yet we recognise a subsequent increase in external prestige of some of these individuals. The importance of network building and maintenance in terms of the progression of careers was an emerging theme.

We were also particularly interested in the role of individual characteristics in career progression. We therefore drew on research on intersectionality (Berger and Guidroz, 2009; Bhopal and Preston, 2012) which considers multiple forms of identity. This broader conceptualisation reflects a perspective of universities as highly complex sites where multiple and intersecting spheres of ‘difference’, including culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status, and language interact. These characteristics are entangled with, or ‘intra-act’ with actors, networks and other materialities to produce new forms of agency in higher education (Morley 2015). A strong theme that emerged, and which we illustrate with quotes throughout the report, is the ‘intra-actions’ between the two cultures of academic and professional services staff, which is a nuanced but pervasive cultural divide despite the levels of ‘boundary crossing’ which are clearly taking place.

Proposed outcomes

- Greater understanding of what is valued and what grants credibility for senior professional leaders working in a space traditionally preserved for academics;
- Potential implications for strategic management in universities, including through recruitment, selection and development of senior professional leaders;
- How personal characteristics impact on career pathways and progression to aid work into diversifying senior management positions;
- Identification of the key professional networks of senior professional leaders;
- Better understanding of how leadership training programmes might be tailored to support the development of future senior professional leaders.

Methodology

Methods

The methodology loosely draws on actor network theory (e.g. Fenwick and Edwards 2010) and is informed by previous research on prestige in academic work (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011). We collected three main sources of data:

- Literature on senior professional leaders and third space professionals in HE;
- Concept-mapping exercises, qualitative interviews with participants with a focus on credibility and prestige, and observations of participants' work environment;
- Statistical information on patterns of promotion and progression into senior leadership roles, drawing from bespoke HESA datasets to analyse over the last 5 years the gender and ethnic breakdown of senior staff in UK HE (HESA Staff Codes B & C).

Data Sample

We sought a purposive sample of 30 high-profile, senior professional leaders to interview. The potential interviewees were identified through:

- A search of university websites for Registrars, Chief Operating Officers (COOs) and equivalent (with a focus on institutions near London, but not exclusively so)
- Recommendations from the steering group, initial participants and our knowledge of individuals in the sector (e.g. those who engage in national debate, discussion and leadership)
- A call for participants to the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA)

The final interview sample consisted of 30 Senior Professional Leaders (identified as 'SPL' numerically throughout the report) in higher education, with 23 men and 7 women. The level of seniority of the interviewees was Chief Operating Officer or Registrar/College Secretary or equivalent. The specific title(s) that interviewees had become a research question itself and is discussed in the Findings section. Some of them have worked their way up through university administration, and others are new to the HE sector. Given the level of seniority of the interviewees it was challenging to schedule interviews but participants were very enthusiastic about the interviews as well as the overall research project.

Data Collection

We aimed to conduct interviews in the staff members' own offices so that they could bring relevant artefacts ('actors') into the discussion, such as certificates, awards, books or reports (in one case a large campus map on the office wall was referred to throughout the discussion). The focus of the interviews was on career pathways and expertise/competence, the 'actors' (e.g. prizes, prestigious roles, other status indicators) and the 'networks' (e.g. professional associations) that senior professional leaders cultivate and accrue over the course of their careers. We explored perceptions of whether gender and other individual characteristics may have an impact, positively or negatively, on these trajectories.

We planned for interviews to be mediated with concept maps (Kandiko & Kinchin 2012; 2013). We began our research interviews asking interviewees to create maps of how they gained credibility in their careers, and we prompted them with questions using critical incident technique to elicit indicators of esteem and associated artefacts, the role of professional networks and the impact of personal characteristics.

We conducted two pilot interviews within King's in June 2017. These significantly helped us refine our interview protocol. Subsequent interviews were conducted in July-September. The interviewees were based in English and Scottish higher education institutions, representing a variety of institutional types, including small specialist institutions, Million+, University Alliance, Russell Group and former 94 Group

institutions. The nature and size of the institution had an impact on the scale and scope of roles of senior professional leaders.

Most interviews took place in the interviewees' offices. Given that some of the interviewees were based in institutions quite far from London, we conducted four interviews via Skype and a few others took place at King's when the interviewee was in London for other purposes. Interviews have lasted between half an hour to two hours and were very rich in terms of the topics covered.

Several adjustments were made to our data collection as we rolled out the interviews. We found that some participants found producing concept maps challenging, and we therefore presented interviewees with the option of producing a concept map. After the first few interviews we also began sending the interview schedule of questions and details about the concept map exercise in advance. Several participants created a concept map prior to the interview and brought it with them. Approximately half of the interviewees took up the opportunity to create a concept map, and we have included a few examples where appropriate in this report.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out, drawing on the concept maps and the transcripts. Analytical codes were initially developed after interviewing was completed. The research team met regularly throughout the data collection period and discussed emergent themes and tentatively linked some of these themes together. Interview transcripts were then coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software, with new codes being added as they emerged. While coding each interview transcript, the interviewee's concept map was reviewed, given that we invited participants to talk directly about what was on their maps. Codes and analytical decisions were discussed iteratively amongst the three members of the research team.

Ethics

We followed the BERA Ethical Guidelines in undertaking this project. We were granted ethical approval from KCL and have a data management plan approved by KCL. Given that the interview sample was a small group of potentially identifiable individuals, we have paid particular attention to maintaining anonymity. We have done this by removing reference to institutions, keeping job titles general rather than specific, and not disclosing details that may identify individuals in terms of their reputations. Identification was a concern to a number of interviewees, but all were comfortable with the precautions laid out in through our research ethics processes.

Selected Findings

As mentioned above, we have grouped the findings section into several themes: career trajectories, credibility, and interpretations of the role and the metaphors they used to describe their role.

A) Career Trajectories

We started the interviews with an exploration of the career paths each individual had undertaken. There was roughly an equal split between the numbers of participants who have spent the majority of their careers in higher education (HE), and those who came into HE through other sectors with a broad range of experiences. A small number of interviewees came from other sectors but with very specialist training (e.g. IT or finance). Those who worked in HE for the majority of their careers tended to have either moved from an early career academic stage into administrative roles, or had worked their way up through a variety of administrative roles (the rather traditional route into the generalist Registrar role).

Those who moved from traditional academic career pathways into professional services roles described fairly opportunistic job changes (e.g. getting 'sucked into' administrative roles), whereas those who came from outside were perhaps a bit more strategic in their decision-making and often had been headhunted. The roles that participants had held outside the HE sector were diverse, including military experience, the NHS, the Civil Service, NATO, and retail (although private sector experience was not common).

There was a general consensus that there has been a recent increase in the numbers of senior professionals coming in from other sectors. The main reason given for this is the increasingly complex nature of HE management, with greater external pressures (e.g. visa compliance; Prevent), which require strong leadership and decision-making capabilities. One participant described the need for greater professionalism in HE given this context:

"The reason that you may be observing this phenomenon, if indeed it is a real phenomenon, of people from outside the sector coming into general management jobs in universities, might be the same reason that a similar sort of thing happened in the civil service about a decade ago, and also happened in a lot of public bodies, which is that once the funding environment changes and you cease to be in receipt of large dollops of state cash, then the kind of... the professionalism agenda goes up." (SPL1)

The reasons for entering HE from outside the sector also varied, but of note was a common theme that the university environment was particularly attractive. Some said they just wanted to try it out as the environment and the challenges of the job looked interesting and possibly even fun. As one participant, who came into the sector from a long career in Whitehall, said: "I thought I would probably enjoy myself in a leading university" (SPL5).

Another participant described how he was lured from jobs in the health sector into higher education by a VC who was able to sell both the challenges and the appeal of a university environment:

"[The VC] talked about all the difficulties that he was encountering, all the challenges that were there. And he presented a storyline that represented, sort of, like, a corporate rescue with a significant value-added aspect of what a university did, both in terms of its impact on the locality, on the students. [. . .] I remember coming and talking to my wife about it and saying it just sounds very different. I might as well give it a go. And I thought I'd come for two years. My mental approach was two years. I could do all sorts of things and then I could go back and get a proper job again." (SPL11)

It was clear that those who came from outside the HE sector (along with their HE counterparts) expressed deep commitments to the role of universities in society, their history and traditions, and their public value. One participant eloquently expressed the appreciation he has for the history of the university:

“[This university] is a place that people want to come to study and feel a part of for the rest of their lives. And so being part of that is a big motivational factor. I enjoy working in a university that’s got such a long and interesting history, and I like the atmosphere that uses that history. The fact that our Medieval maces, which are priceless - we can’t insure them, they’re so valuable - they get out of their cases and they’re processed at graduations. I rather like the ceremony that goes with any academic institution, but particularly an old one.” (SPL3)

Another interviewee, who came into HE after a long career in Whitehall, described what he values about working in a university in these terms:

“Making a contribution to what is a wonderfully successful enterprise in the main. I just feel this is a delightfully tolerant, diverse, international community that is great to have as part of London and the UK. It’s one of the examples of Britain doing things well.” (SPL4)

The sense of pride in the institution was often accompanied by an appreciation of the role that their university played in shaping society and transforming lives. As one participant said in response to a question about his motivation to be in HE:

“Well, I can give the very trite answer, I suppose, which is the transformational impact that we have on students, and the fact that we have a student population that is very diverse, both in nationality, in ethnicity, in gender.” (SPL23)

There were others who expressed very similar sentiments: e.g. “universities are a force for good”. These sentiments contrast rather starkly with some of the research literature that paints senior managers in the contemporary university as neoliberal and/or managerial: concerned more with cost-cutting, efficiency, and competition than the value of scholarship and education. Clearly many of our participants had much respect and understanding of the value of the university. However, there was some uncertainty as to whether an increase in leaders from outside the sector might become detrimental. As one participant said:

“I suppose one of the things that I’ve found a little bit frustrating over the last, I suppose a trend that’s happened in the last five or so years, is the tendency to recruit in from outside of the sector, into very senior positions. Whilst those people do bring in new skills and new perceptions and perspectives on higher education, I think it’s a real shame for people who have dedicated their professional lives to actually working within an environment, because they really, really care about it, and I think it would be a real shame if that balance went.” (SPL25)

In addition, there were a number of participants from non-HE backgrounds who noticed the tendency for academic staff to be more loyal to their disciplines than to the institution. As one explained: ‘a lot of academics will say, I work *at* the University of X rather than, I work *for* the university’, and he wrote the term ‘the academic at’ on his concept map while talking about it.

Another expressed a similar view by explaining that the most important aspect of the job is to work for the good of the whole enterprise, and she downplayed the importance of individual achievement: “If you’re part of a successful machine, you’re part of a successful machine” (SPL12). This view of working *for* the institution is quite a stark contrast with the individualistic nature of academic careers (Kandiko Howson et al 2017). These differences between the academic and ‘non-academic’ worldviews were a common theme throughout the research, and we will explore more of them in later sections.

The final topic in this section on career trajectories is about further career progression, and to what positions they would advance to if they were to progress again. A number of our participants acknowledged that there are relatively 'young' people in their position, who maybe have 15 more years left to work. The question of how and where to spend the last stages of the career was therefore an interesting issue.

Traditionally, the COO or Registrar job was seen as the pinnacle of a professional services career in HE, but now the possibility of moving up into a VC role is at least up for discussion (although Sue Shepherd (2017) argues it is not possible in pre-1992 universities). It was widely agreed amongst our participants that although it would be unusual for someone in the position of Registrar or COO to move into a VC role, it was not impossible. One participant noted that although COOs and Registrars rarely become VCs, the role of Deputy Vice Chancellor (a few of our participants had this title: see Appendix of entire list of job titles) lends itself more easily to being seen as a route to a VC role:

"There's very, very few registrars who have gone on to DVCs. I mean, I think there are three possibly in total although, obviously, senior civil servants move into VC positions relatively easily. [. . .] I'd love to be DVC as well because, actually, I mean, it is funny because having that label really does bestow, you know, a massive additional bonus on you, you know, because you're suddenly seen as a potential VC in a way that you would not be . . . if you've got that title you'd be eligible to be considered for any VC job in a way that you simply aren't on the whole by being a registrar or COO." (SPL16)

A few participants did speculate that, whatever the job title at that level, it should now be possible for people of their position to progress to the top job. As one explained:

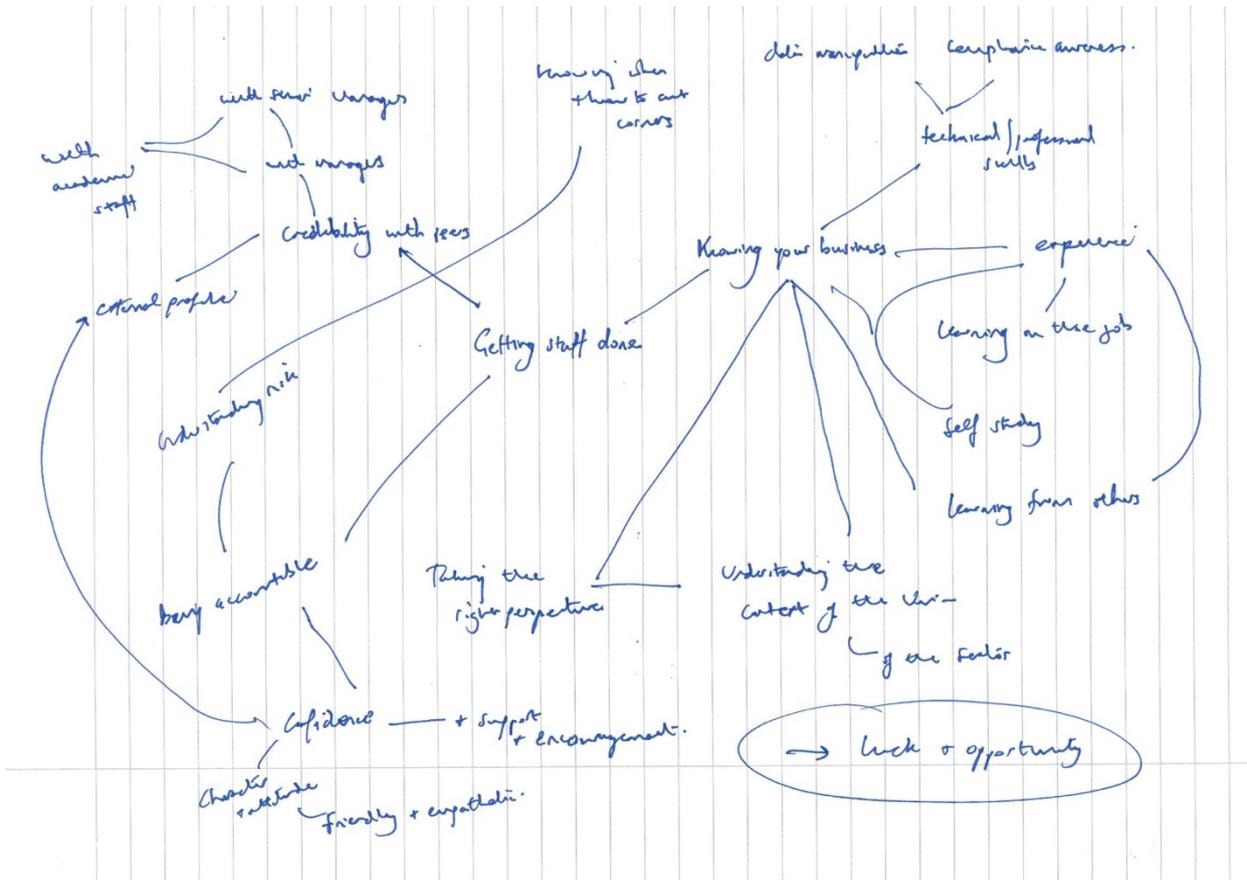
"I also think there's something, and I would say this, wouldn't I? About people like me who've come up through the higher education flat-lands and seen what it's like. If they have the skill-set and the competence to actually take that top job, I think we're at a time now where they ought to be able to. So, I don't have an issue with the successful registrar secretary chief operating officer becoming a VC or chief executive." (SPL12)

However, other participants felt that at the level of COO or Registrar, it is no longer appropriate to simply be looking to the next move up in the same organisation:

"Other things will come along, and you can change university. You can change role in the same institution. You can go and do something completely different. I mean, there'll be things to do. But, you know, you just have to go, the version of me that was all about onwards and upwards isn't appropriate anymore." (SPL14)

A trend has been noted in the HE sector in the US for increasing numbers of university presidents to be appointed from outside the sector (Beardsley 2017). It may be that in the coming years in the UK there are more senior professional services staff appointed to lead universities, given that much of what a COO seems to be undertaking is a type of *de facto* running of the organisation already. It certainly seemed from our interviews that the possibility is now on the table.

B) Credibility



(Concept Map SPL18)

As mentioned above, we approached this research with an interest in prestige, given that our previous research had highlighted how important the 'prestige economy' is for the progression of academic careers. (Coate, K. and Kandiko Howson 2016; Kandiko Howson, C., Coate, K. and de St Croix, T. 2017). We were curious about the role of 'prestige' for the careers of these senior leaders from 'non-academic' backgrounds and/or with experience outside the HE sector. One of our first interviewees made it clear that 'prestige' was not a term with currency amongst non-academic leaders; or at least the obvious display of prestige: "the golden rule is carry any experience you have with humility" (SPL1).

Given what the interviewees told us about their career trajectories, it was clear that some of them had quite prestigious backgrounds. Yet our discussions about career progression inevitably circled around the concept of 'credibility' far more than 'prestige'. Credibility for these senior leaders is the ability to get things done (for example, see above concept map that has in the centre 'getting stuff done'). We were given numerous examples of the value of being a problem-solver and a person who could 'fix things'. Indeed, one interviewee suggested one of the reasons he was hired was because he had the 'tools' to fix things, which he contrasted with a more strategic role:

“So they had said they wanted a strategic leader. They didn't want a strategic leader. They wanted somebody with a screwdriver who'd done it all before and knew exactly which screws needed to be done.” (SPL10)

We found in many of our discussions that credibility was accrued over time (in a similar manner as academics accrue indicators of esteem), through solving fairly large problems and then gaining a reputation for having solved those problems. As they spoke about their value to the institution, similar terminology kept cropping up:

“Sorting stuff out and making the connections, and the ability to walk all the way around a problem. [. . .] Working out which of the stones to turn over. And some of the stones, you know there will be wiggly things underneath.” (SPL3)

A number of them described how they tended to solve the problems that others had been unable to solve, for example:

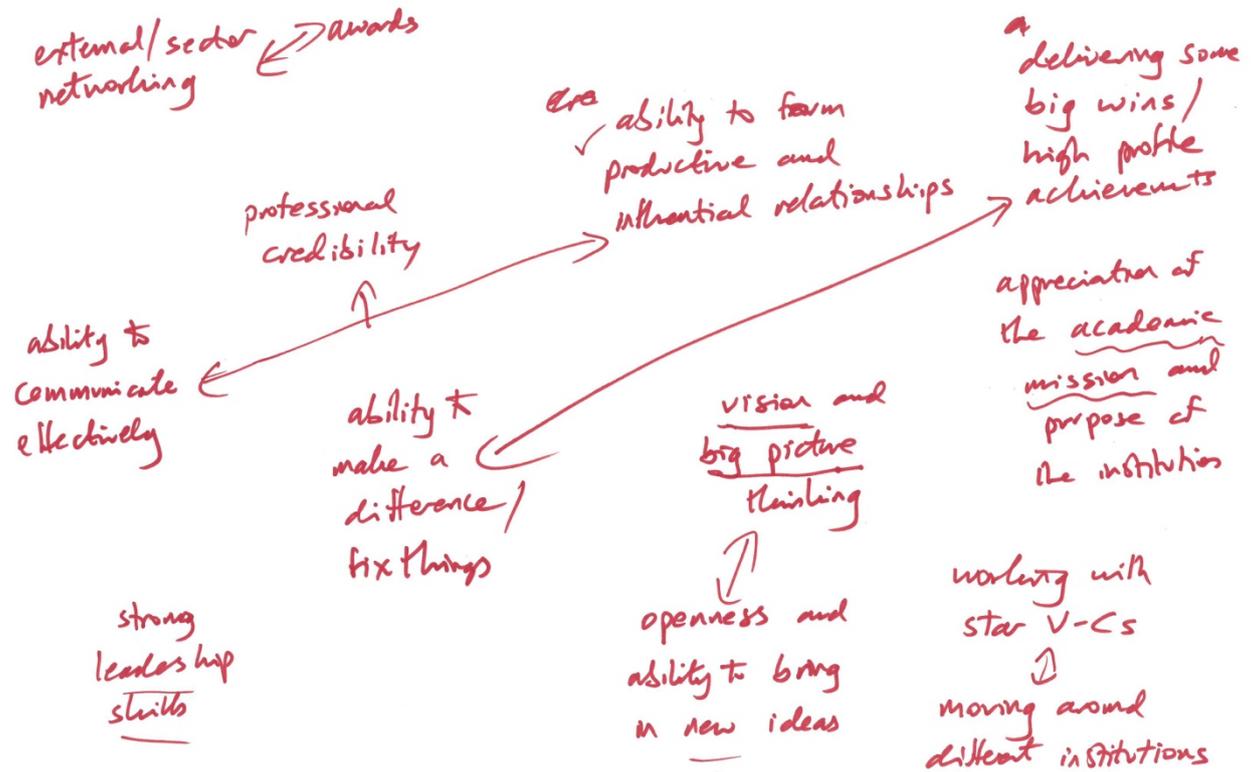
“And if your attitude is you want to achieve things and get things done, I mean I find that quite a lot of, you know, intractable problems that people haven't tackled, I sort of put my hand up to sort out. And that involves getting people together across the university and having a few meetings and getting people to agree what the solution is. I think I do quite a bit of that.” (SPL4)

Taking on a broad portfolio, often including the less glamorous aspects of university management, was also seen as important:

“The corporate, the governance, the audit, the risk. Health and safety, adjudication, all the weird things. Everything nobody wants basically. Legal. Any problems.” (SPL6)

The term ‘big picture’ was used with frequency, and was often contrasted with the academic culture that tends to be ‘siloed’ or ‘narrow’ in focus:

“I think there is something about vision and big picture, and I think something that is inherent in a lot of academic work is it narrows you down deliberately and it takes you further and further in, and I think one of the things you can do in a professional leadership role is actually lift people back from the detail. I think that kind of vision and big picture, an openness and ability to bring in new ideas, I think that that set of things is important.” (SPL20)



(Concept Map SPL20)

Credibility was also described as being gained through consistency, reliability, and knowing how to influence people within the academic environment. The above concept map neatly captures many of these ideas which were common in our interviews.

Clearly the role of ‘getting things done’ requires the ability to influence others, but it was understood that it is not possible in a university to rely on being able to tell people what to do. As one interviewee said:

“Anyone that operates in an academic environment is used to the fact that universities do operate on influence rather than on command. If you’re going to be any good at it, you’ve got to be able to persuade people to do things rather than to tell them to do things, because it just doesn’t work, does it, in an academic environment.” (SPL23)

Being open, transparent and honest were often mentioned as important for effective leadership:

“If you want to influence a group of people, influence in a good way, not in some kind of underhand, clandestine manner, but if you want to be in an influencing role, it’s important to be able to engage in a dialogue with people on their terms, and understand and listen.” (SPL25)

These skills were sometimes contrasted with leadership in the non-HE sector, which was described as tolerating much more directive leadership styles. In academic environments, it was seen as important to be able to negotiate the debates and criticisms that inevitably arose over management decisions:

“People wouldn’t mess with me if when I was a director in a private... you know, if I said something was going to happen that was what was going to happen, whereas in a university everyone - despite being the registrar - will tell me why it’s the wrong thing to do, you know. And you’ve got to sort of relish that kind of high challenge and see the benefit and the importance of being able to argue your case.” (SPL24)

As has been apparent in a number of the above quotes, a common theme within the interviews was that, on the whole, these senior professional leaders recognised that the work that academics do, the ways they do it and the values that motivate them are very different to the motivations and values that our interviewees described. The ‘two cultures’ divide still seems to be a highly significant aspect of the work environment, even though at the top levels of the organization these leaders work very closely together.

There were a number of ways in which the ‘two cultures’ were described as distinct from each other, but they mainly revolved around the idea that academic work needs some freedom for creativity to flourish, whereas the senior professional leaders worked in the realm of regulation and governance. As one participant described it:

“And so, from a governance point of view, putting governance structures, which are all about control and compliance, and finding ways of matching those to... an essentially sort of Wild West, libertarian, academic freedom environment of creative people who just want to be, you know, let go to get on with the job, that’s an interesting challenge.” (SPL3)

Another participant suggested that the two cultures needed to remain separate:

So actually, within professional services, in academia that works really well, because actually a little bit of chaos creates the environment for innovation and creativity. In professional services a little bit of chaos is a lot of chaos.” (SPL25)

These types of discussions around the ‘two cultures’ sometimes led to a discussion about whether ways of working in the academic culture were good preparation for senior leadership roles, with the majority of participants of the opinion that they were not. A number of participants described the traditional academic pathway as unsuitable preparation for a senior leadership role in the contemporary university, particularly given that academics are more likely to progress to those senior levels without the type of leadership training that the professional services leaders had obtained. Some of our participants were a little disparaging of their academic colleagues who ended up in leadership roles, such as:

“My experience is that only a small minority of academics who get started on having management jobs are actually at all successful in doing it, and quite a few should be left back to go back to their departments and do some research again.” (SPL4)

The cultural divide works both ways, however. A number of participants had experienced disparagement from academic colleagues. One interviewee described one of his first days walking around campus with the VC:

“And this little old man came up to me, I didn’t know who he was at the time, I’ve learnt afterwards he was one of their Nobel Prize winning professors, of which they have several. Came straight up to me, poked me with his finger in the chest and said to me, we don’t need people like you.” (SPL6)

Although the above interviewee felt that this type of encounter would not happen in the contemporary climate, it was still apparent that the divide persists in many nuanced but not unsubtle ways. However, it seems that at the top levels of the organization, the cultural divides manage to find some type of harmony. It was through some of the metaphors that our interviewees used, discussed in the final

section, that tried to capture this type of 'yin-yang' balance that seems to function at the highest levels of management.

C) Metaphor (Interpretations of the Role)

In this final, short section we just want to briefly touch on the rich metaphors that our participants used to describe their roles. We were struck by the ways in which the participants often began describing what they do through the use of analogies with other sectors or various metaphors. One of the more memorable metaphors was about a plain black bird which has one red tail feather it uses in order to attract a mate. This participant was describing how he would normally not draw attention to himself, but every now and then he will put up his red tail feather (not to get a mate, but to send out certain signals that give him weight).

We have listed here some examples of quotes in which the participants describe their roles in interesting ways:

“You have to be the kind of the memory, the spirit, the long-term guardian of what your institution means.” (SPL24)

“If you're the permanent secretary of a very big government department, you have a lot of clout. You have a good deal of power, but you would be very, very careful that you would not usurp your minister. [. . .] the defining characteristic of a proper Whitehall permanent secretary, in most cases, is that they're not very visible.” (SPL1)

“The stars of the show here, you know, this is an opera house, Pavarotti is over there, you know, my job is to make sure the curtains open and close at the right time and, you know, there's sort of popcorn in the stalls.” (SPL1)

“You are running the ship, you know, steering the ship. You can have your star performers, prima donnas, whatever you want to call them.” (SPL7)

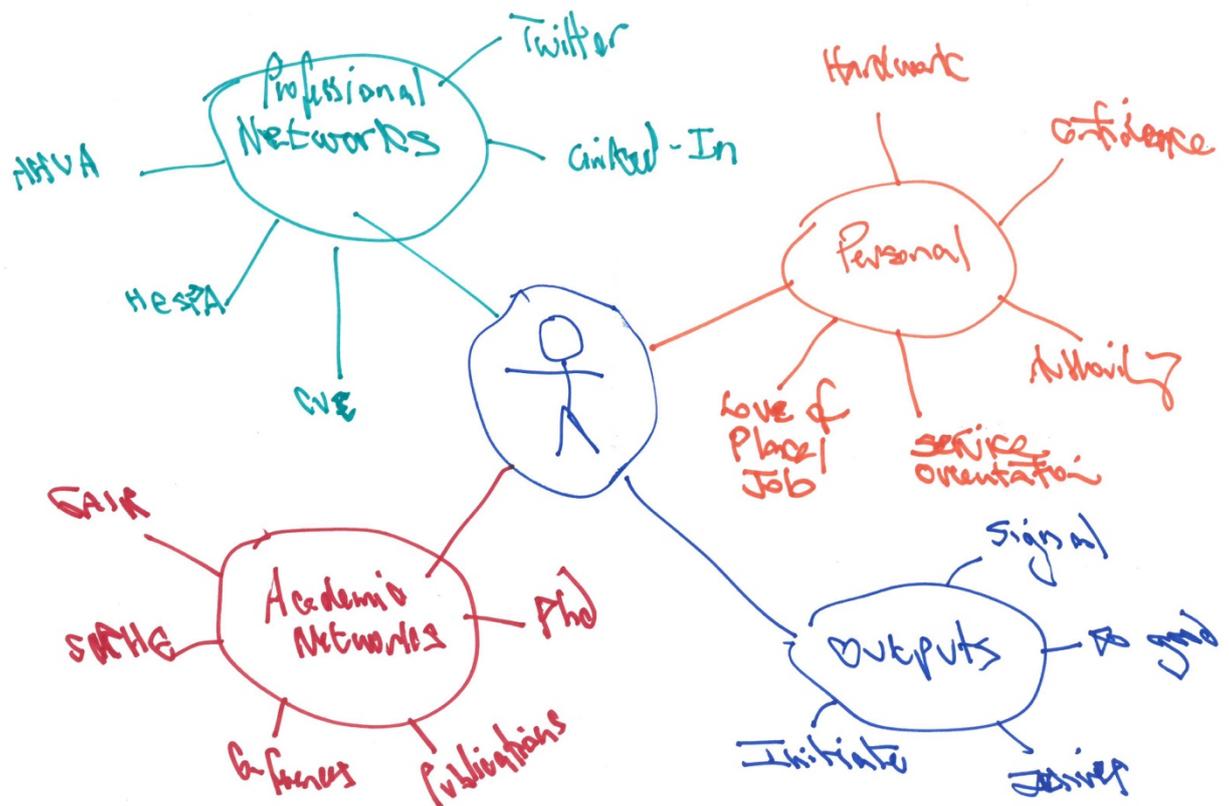
“You know, I'm not a Spitfire. You know, I don't, kind of, charge in, and shoot everything to death, and charge out again. [The VC] does a bit of that. I'm more your mid-range bomber, so you give me a project and, you know, it's got to have some breadth and some complexity, and I might spend a year and 18 months doing it, and it'll have a good result.” (SPL16)

There are also examples of these analogies in the literature:

“Some perceive registrars as akin to old-style civil servants, generalists, stuffed-shirt amateurs, obsessed with rules and protocol, resistant to change [. . .] Then there is the army parallel – the registrar as adjutant – always at the right hand of the commanding officer, acting as a sort of sounding board or gopher. On the other hand, there is my own preferred image, drawn from the greatest ever Hollywood film, *The Godfather*. Here, the registrar is Robert Duvall's character, Tom Hagen – 'il consigliere', a figure who is both adviser and the person who gets things done.” (Duncan 2014: 39).

In future publications we wish to explore these metaphors and analogies further. As we mentioned above, the identifiable professional characteristics of these senior staff have not emerged clearly in the literature, and it is interesting that they seem to very easily resort to metaphor. Most of them point to the ways in which their jobs complement the jobs that the academic leaders are doing (the academic PVC's are the 'stars', for example, while the COO 'pulls the curtain'). We think there is much more to be said in this space.

Concluding Comments



(Concept Map SPL16)

There are a number of emerging themes which we will analyse in more depth for our conference presentations and scholarly outputs. What we did not have space to cover in this report, and which we see as particularly important, are the topics of gender and intersectionality, and the importance of networks and the 'intra-actions' of actors in the networks (Morley 2015). There are other theoretical avenues we wish to explore, including the forms of capital (Maton 2006) that these senior professionals bring with them, which is distinct from academic capital (for example, see above concept map which shows some similar forms of academic capital alongside other less familiar forms of capital).

The final point to make is that we have a very rich collection of data now and have only begun the process of analysis. The dissemination plans are to reach a wide range of audiences through traditional scholarly routes but also social media and professional associations such as the AHUA (who have already scheduled a session into their annual conference for us). We feel there will be a great deal of interest in this project and we are looking forward to the dissemination phase.

Dissemination

Proposed outputs

- Final project report introducing key issues and themes, supported by concept maps;
- Launch event with publication of open access report;
- SRHE Blog post;
- *Perspectives* article;
- Conference presentation at SRHE Annual Research Conference and one other HE focused European level conference;
- SRHE Academic Practice Network Seminar and other seminars as appropriate;
- Website with project outputs and resources;
- Academic journal article in *Studies in Higher Education* or comparable journal;
- Policy-oriented article in *Higher Education Quarterly* or comparable journal.

Coate, K. (2017) Senior Professional Leaders in Higher Education: The Role of Prestige. Presentation at BERA Annual Conference, University of Sussex, 5-7 September 2017.

Coate, K. (2018) Developing yourself as an established COO/Registrar. Invited Workshop at the Association of Heads of University of Administrators Annual Conference, University of Manchester, 9-11 April 2018.

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Appendix: List of Job Titles of Participants

- Chief Operating Officer
- Vice Principal (Governance & Planning)
- College Secretary
- University Secretary
- Registrar
- Registrar and University Secretary
- Pro Vice Chancellor (Operations)
- Chief Strategy Officer
- Director of Strategy, Planning & Change
- Academic Registrar
- Registrar and COO
- Chief of Operations & Estates
- Director of Planning, Legal & Governance

Interview schedule

Interview Schedule (final)

Concept map

Concept mapping involves making a map using key concepts, and using phrases to link the concepts together. We would like you to draw a concept map to answer this question.

Think about yourself and other people you know, how do you think senior professional leaders develop their career and gain credibility in Higher Education (e.g. network, awards, key career achievements, professional career association)?

You can draw your concept map before we ask your interview questions, or you can list a few things for start and stop at any point of the interview to add or cross things from your map, or you can draw your map at the end of the interview to summarise your thoughts.

Interview questions

- How would you describe your career trajectory? What did you gain from particular roles?
- Can you think of an incident or example of making strategic decisions or influencing others that captures what is seen as having credibility and influence in your professional work?
- What do you value in professional life?
 - What motivates you?
- What is highly valued or considered prestigious by others in professional life:
 - ✓ By your colleagues?
 - ✓ In your institution?
 - ✓ In the higher education sector generally?
- What do you think the role is for Senior Professional Leaders in Higher Education given coming changes to the HE sector?
- How do you think senior professional leaders develop their career and gain credibility in Higher Education? Can you draw/add/describe your concept map now?
- Anything else you would like to add that we have not already discussed