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Knowledge, distributed leadership and (structured) agency: a view on academic policy curation

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Abstract

This opinion piece explores some of the experiences encountered by the non-teaching staff responsible for curating academic policy in institutions. As the framework that upholds standards in universities, academic policy bears significant influence on the whole university community. Academic policy can provide stability to institutions – a fact that should not be undervalued given the 'supercomplex' (Barnett, 2000) environment in which the workforce now operates. In this light, the opinion piece illustrates the need for a different type of academic policymaking. It also identifies the potential for existing teams to fill this gap. Despite being a function with a long history in universities, teams responsible for the assurance and management of academic quality have generally been overlooked as a mitigating factor against the uncertainty of an ever-changing political and regulatory environment. The author will suggest that, throughout their policy work, Quality professionals are unrecognised catalysts for operational, pedagogic and strategic change. The discussion will underscore their importance as not simply translators but narrators of academic policy. The piece will close with some reflections on the personal, cultural and structural constraints that limit the value that these professionals can bring to their universities. Threats to colleagues' agency should be considered threats to the compliance, agility and general effectiveness of academic policy. The conclusion will suggest some solutions that colleagues may wish to consider. Discussions are contextualised within theories and frameworks related to educational policymaking, the influence of neoliberal government agendas, and the experience of third-space professionals.

Keywords: academic policy; quality; regulation; third space; professional services.

Introduction

This short paper presents the complexities of, and opportunities for, colleagues in the university workforce responsible for academic policy. The shape of academic policy varies by institution; however, it can be broadly defined as a set of rules that mitigate the risk of an institution deviating from its agreed standards. Academic policies are vital for maintaining standards across courses by outlining norms for assessment, curriculum design, and academic review. Academic policy arises from policymaking. Policymaking can entail a range of components, from problem identification to agenda setting and implementation. For the sake of brevity, the arguments presented here will focus on the experience of colleagues working in Academic Quality (AQ) teams. In the author's experience, the emphasis placed on quality by the sector's regulator, renders AQ teams responsible for the maintenance, and more recently curation, of complex academic policy in institutions. However, much of this discussion can be usefully considered concerning the experience of any colleague bridging the gap between government agenda and teaching practice in some way.

This piece is underpinned by a nested case study undertaken by the author (as an external researcher) at the time of the conception of the Office for Students (OfS). As a regulator defined by their focus on quantitative student outcomes, the OfS's arrival to the sector proved a watershed moment for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and, the author argues, 'non-teaching' colleagues alike.

Three assertions are presented to the reader. The first is that university professionals are working in a 'supercomplex' (Barnett, 2000) operating environment. Barnett (2000) positioned universities as having a role in both creating and mitigating society's existential 'pandemonium'. In 2024, academic policymakers are key to supporting institutions in navigating a triad of institutional complexity: massification, diversification and regulation. These colleagues (most of whom do not teach as part of their contracts) are responding to unprecedented levels of requests for more, increasingly detailed, policy and associated guidance, for the good of both students and staff. The second assertion, largely due to the increase in high-stakes sector regulation, is that those at 'the coalface' of academic policymaking are an untapped, often unrecognised network of change makers. Through their policymaking, they facilitate operational, pedagogic and strategic solutions to improve student outcomes. Third and finally, the agency of these colleagues is threatened by both

personal and structural factors. Here agency is defined as the ability to exert influence over the policy environment in which they work. Despite the value that some professional staff bring to policymaking in their institutions, their belonging to policy spaces can be made precarious by others' assumptions that they do not belong.

Whose knowledge is prioritised?

A nested case study undertaken by the author in Spring 2019 exposed only a small percentage of the university workforce as having access to the creation of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submission and subsequent academic policy development. TEF submissions summarise university teaching strategies and priorities, including what an institution means by educational excellence and gain. The submission presents a unique opportunity to discuss an institution's pedagogic DNA explicitly and internally.

However, in this case study the 'exclusivity' of access to the submission led to resistance and distrust, impacting relationships in the academic schools studied and, by extension, the capacity of the submission to facilitate joined-up thinking about faculty teaching. Other key findings included an inability to identify a local definition of excellence, and general confusion, ambivalence and disdain surrounding structural and cultural changes. Readers may be surprised to hear that the colleagues whose expertise was called on to create the submission were not those with 'type 1 disciplinary knowledge' (loosely translated as those with 'academic knowledge'). The study brought attention to a group of 'administrative' colleagues who were leaned on to translate, facilitate and co-write the submission with senior leadership.

The work highlighted networks of institutional decision-making that reflected recent work exploring the increased reliance on and, ultimately, professionalisation of 'non-teaching' staff (Gresham, 2014; Saunders and Sin, 2015; Oancea, 2019). Oancea's (2019) work on enacting the Research Excellence Framework (REF) provides explicit insights into institutions' reliance on 'professionals' to respond to policy. This new body of work marks a shift from focusing on the mechanics of university governance (often with the 'academic community' at its core), to recognising the identities of those doing the work. Despite the increasing commentary that some professional service colleagues are key to setting policy direction, further questions arose: what are universities doing to formally recognise this

shift? How do professional colleagues upskill themselves to meet these 'new' expectations? And what can be done to break down the walls that still exist between parts of the university workforce?

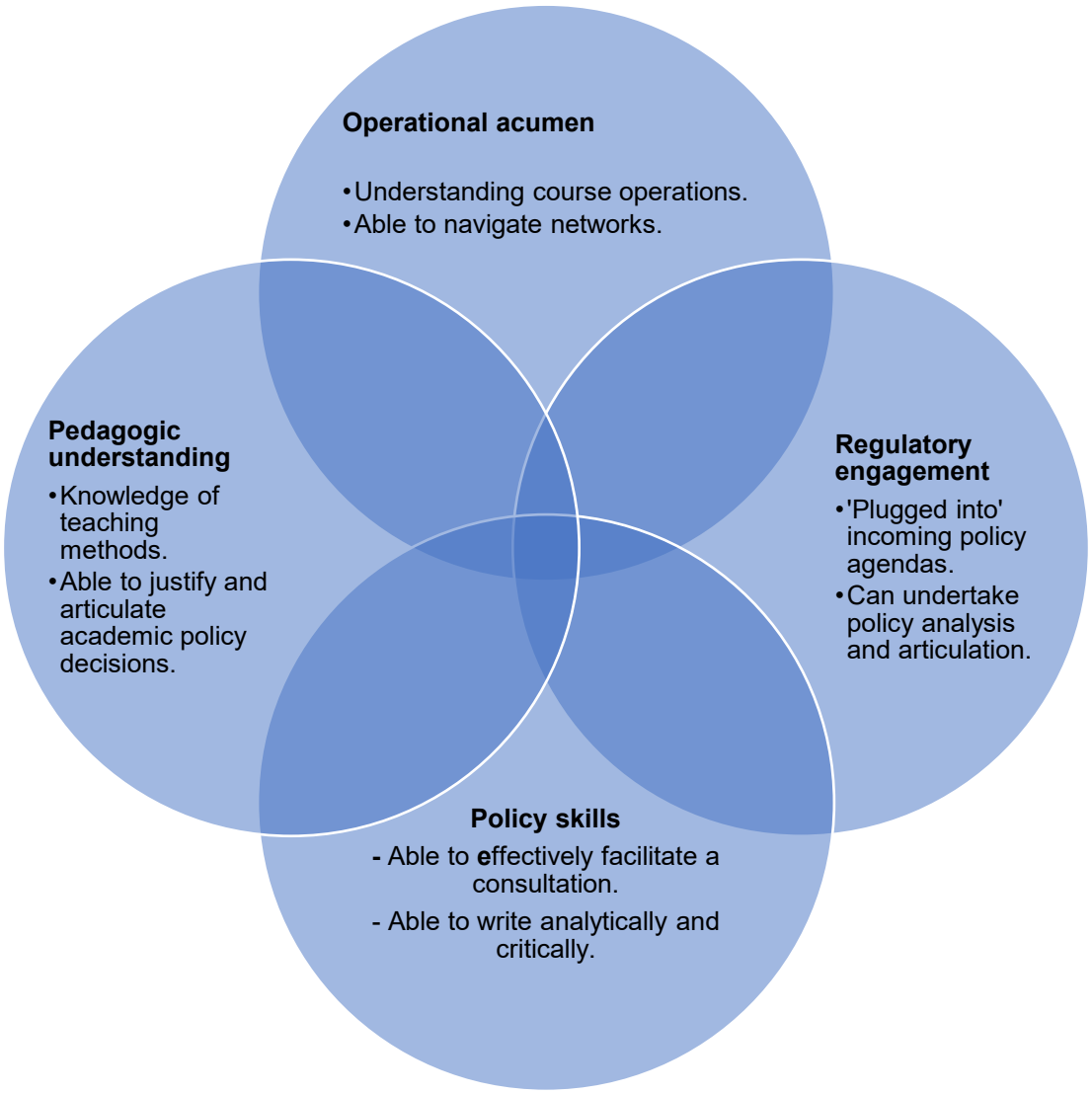
Quality professionals as 'policy narrators'

Quality teams have a rich history in UK educational institutions. In most universities, Quality (and Standards) functions were among the first 'non-teaching' roles to exist, charged with core university activity including processing assessments, auditing the spread of awards, and servicing committees. Excluding some light commentary that placed Quality colleagues in the growing 'administrative management' cadre (Strathern, 2000; Whitchurch, 2004), few have sought to explore Quality teams' wider contributions to good student outcomes through effective academic policy. This is particularly poignant in the context of our current regulatory landscape. Quality colleagues' ownership of academic policies places them as key to the policymaking process, one which requires a skilled hand to capture the 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000) that characterises our operating environment.

An example of this is the institutional need for policy that balances stability and credibility with the very real possibility of incoming political agendas at any point in the academic year. Being an effective policy 'owner' is therefore no longer about interpretation and occasional tweaking, but horizon-scanning, internal consultation, and agile policy writing. The ability to run effective and informed consultations is significant. More specifically a professional's ability to hold regulatory requirements in one hand whilst considering how an agenda may 'land' in a growing and increasingly diverse faculty (Saunders and Sin, 2015). Ball et al.'s (2011) work on policymaking in schools would categorise Quality professionals as increasingly narrating, as opposed to, interpreting, policy. In schools, policy narration ordinarily falls to head teachers, who translate government agendas to land effectively in their specific school context. However, the size and increasing complexity of HEIs call for a form of distributed leadership that quality professionals are already taking on. An example of this is the current work many Quality teams are doing to re-develop academic policies so that they are effectively aligned with the new, incredibly wide-ranging QAA Quality Code. Above all, this work requires the ability to map other regulatory environments to this new 'agenda', skill in policy articulation and an appreciation

of institutional context and its limitations. Within this context, one can argue that Quality professionals more than ever need to be recognised as holding similar attributes and knowledge to other effective university staff, albeit perhaps in different proportions. The author considers four overarching needs that can be observed in an effective Quality professional (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Possible attributes of an effective quality professional



We should consider Quality professionals as operating in new spaces: structurally, as individuals go ‘into’ schools to consult as policy professionals, and conceptually, as individuals enter a liminal space between administration and teaching. These spaces require knowledge, skill and experience previously ‘owned’ by others.

The structured agency of those working in the academic policy space

In the case study of those preparing their TEF submission, it became clear that, despite being given access to the appropriate spaces (here: membership of quality and enhancement committees and protected time with senior leadership), staff faced several obstacles to acquiring unstructured agency. These obstacles echo those that Quality professionals must navigate to harness their potential as policy *narrators*.

Firstly, whilst universities increasingly rely on professional staff to ensure compliance with a high-stakes regulator, *how* staff can respond to this agenda is often limited. This can be down to the skill of the individual as much as the nature of the institution in question. The former should not be underestimated. Even with the increased interest in third-space professionals, it remains a challenge to pinpoint the specific skills that colleagues require to thrive in the spaces between administration and teaching. More broadly, development courses on identified skill gaps such as academic policy writing are challenging to find. This is exacerbated by the rate of regulatory change, often needing to be responded to alongside a team's already busy 'business as usual' (including intensive core activities such as committee work). The question of institutional 'type' is also significant. Third space professionals inevitably thrive in institutions whose governance is underpinned by a network governance model. In such institutions, distributed leadership structures are prioritised and valued. However, in so overtly prioritising quantitative metrics, it is generally understood that our current regulatory regime encourages top-down performance management (Barkas et al., 2019). Senior leadership colleagues 'pulling rank' could go a long way to placing limits on professional colleagues' agency.

Secondly, even if professionals were able to upskill appropriately *and* navigate the complexities of university hierarchy, their expertise, and therefore agency, could be considered 'unsettling' by the wider academic community (Zahir, 2010). If this sentiment is present, it is unpleasant and can spread like wildfire. The case study mentioned in this paper found professional staff actively avoiding taking a position on regulatory matters in front of 'teaching' colleagues. The author considered the faculty's lack of definition of 'teaching excellence' a direct consequence and demonstration of the structured agency staff embodied. The negative effect that a job title can have on 'non-academic' colleagues' perceived skill and agency has been explored by Melling (2018). Furthermore, the case study explored the experience of professional staff embedded within a faculty.

Professional staff who work in central departments, such as those writing academic policy, often have the added complexity of overcoming the perception of 'coming from the centre' (Whitchurch, 2015). Managerialism and centralisation often go hand in hand. Quality professionals then must find ways to compensate for inhabiting a space that is neither 'academic', nor 'local'.

Conclusion

This short paper introduced the need for a different type of academic policymaking as a means of meeting our 'supercomplex' operating environment. It also identified the potential for existing teams to fill this gap. Whilst there remains work to do in the articulation of Quality professionals as policy narrators, identifying them as such is a step towards providing institutions with the type of mature policy infrastructure required.

This paper also introduced some ongoing challenges faced by professionals navigating academic policymaking. Some of these challenges can be met with a more purposeful development agenda. Given that academic policy affects everyone in an institution, development opportunities that increase relational knowledge, such as shadowing, should be more widely considered. Such opportunities would also increase credibility on 'both sides' – for those writing a policy (often professional staff) and for those providing their lived experience for consideration (often colleagues with teaching responsibilities or even students).

Culturally, senior leaders continue to have a role to play in encouraging colleagues to critically reflect on the different types of knowledge that reside in an institution. Where teaching colleagues are primarily responsible for facilitating skill and knowledge gain in their students, professional staff are primarily responsible for the facilitation of their own knowledge base – whether that be an understanding of regulatory requirements or otherwise. Where we seek inspiration for better articulating the contribution of different professionals we could turn our attention to other public sector institutions, including but not limited to the civil service. In an age of 'supercomplexity', educational institutions simply cannot function on one type of knowledge alone.

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