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Organisational career conversations: exploring the experiences and perceptions of professional services line-managers in higher education

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Abstract

Many organisations are not confident about their career development strategy, but career conversations with line-managers are one of the main ways in which it is carried out (Hirsh, 2021). The public sector is distinctive in its approach towards staff and the careers of university professional services staff is an under-researched area including the shape of career trajectories for third space professionals and how these are managed by institutions (Whitchurch, 2022). This study examines the experiences and perceptions of line-managers in professional services in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in holding career conversations. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis identified three themes focusing on the ways in which line-managers (i) encourage and enable career conversations taking place, (ii) balance the dynamics of career conversations between individual and organisational needs, and (iii) express opinions which challenge the status quo of training and development and career progression in UK HEIs. The discussion identifies that line-managers value career conversations and feel equipped to hold them but consider they need more support in terms of the organisational infrastructure that lies behind a career conversation. There was evidence of a hybrid career concept in which there are elements of reciprocal responsibility for career management between the organisation and the individual. The study therefore finds that organisational support needs re-evaluation and barriers to career progression for professional services staff are a priority for the sector to address, highlighting that doing so can promote social justice and recognise the impact of social context in contemporary organisational career development practice.

Keywords: career conversations; career development; line-management; social justice; hybrid career model; professional services; higher education.

Introduction

This study examines professional services (PS) line-managers' experiences of holding career conversations in UK HEIs. The project builds on existing research on the practices and challenges of career development which demonstrates that many organisations are not confident about their career development strategy (Hirsh, 2021). The main practices used to support career development in organisations have remained largely unchanged for two decades and comprise, 'an open, internal job market […] formal and informal career conversations with the line-manager; and self-help career information and/or career planning tools' (Hirsh, 2021, p.51). If career conversations with line-managers are key to organisational career development, then it is important to explore the experiences and perceptions of line-managers tasked with holding them.

The public sector was chosen since many studies of approaches to career development issues such as talent management have tended to focus on private-sector, commercial settings (for example, Collings, Mellahi and Cascio, 2019; Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen and Scullion, 2020). There are calls for this analysis to be broadened to include the public sector, addressing the increasing influence of 'new managerialist agendas' and the sector's 'more intense competition for talent' alongside traditional public sector values such as fairness and equality of opportunity (Kravariti et al., 2022, p.2; p. 4). Secondly, HEIs were chosen because these institutions are significant public sector employers and, at the time of conducting the study, were experiencing industrial action related to pay, working conditions and pensions (Clarke, Tairo and Standley, 2023). Thirdly, PS line-managers were selected because the careers of university PS staff is an under-researched area (Gander, 2021; Ishaq and Hussain, 2022) and barriers to career progression have been identified as a strategic issue for the sector to address (Gander, Girardi and Paull, 2019). Consequently, the research question for the study is: what are the experiences of line-managers in professional services in UK HEIs in holding career conversations? The research aims to explore PS line-managers' experiences of career conversations and investigate how these line-managers view their skills, ability and training needs, as well as their role and responsibilities, in relation to career development.

Literature review

Organisational career theory attempts to understand the dynamics and interactions between individual agency, organisational processes, and social context (Davey, 2021). The traditional organisational career concept was of a career 'bounded' within one organisation and managed by an employer. Theories of the 'protean' and 'boundaryless' career were developed between the 1970s and 1990s, focusing on the power of individuals to move between and beyond both organisational and institutional structures or influences (Hall and Moss, 1998; Arthur, 2014). These approaches marginalised the role and importance of organisational support for individual careers (Davey, 2021). Research has also subsequently identified a shift in the psychological contract between organisation and employee, and the new deal on offer is more transactional and short-term (Crawshaw, 2006). Theories of a hybrid career model have been developed to describe how individuals currently conceive of organisational careers. These combine paternalistic elements with an individual's responsibility for career management (Crawshaw, 2006). Research indicates such a hybrid career model fits conceptions of contemporary organisational careers in some sectors, including PS staff in universities (Gander, 2021). This study builds upon these findings by examining the perceptions of line-managers in relation to the 'deal' which HE organisations are offering PS staff for career development and the line-manager's role in this, which has often been overlooked (Clarke and Scurry, 2020). This study also considers what conception of 'career' is perceived to be operating in UK HEIs and whether there is any evidence of a hybrid career concept.

Critiques of theories such as the 'boundaryless career' have found insufficient empirical evidence of the phenomenon (for example, Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Inkson et al., 2012) and negative repercussions from their ideological basis (for example, Baruch and Vardi, 2016). The human capital theory underlying them has led employers to seek to positively influence company performance by retaining and developing the careers of those with high levels of human capital in the form of 'unique and valuable skills' (Davey, 2021, p.146), as opposed to individuals perceived to be lower in ability or skill-set. The risk of approaches based on theories of human capital is the negative impact for employees who are excluded from this type of talent management (Kichuk, Brown and Ladkin, 2019). A two-tiered workforce develops where elite groups prosper while what is perceived as the lower-value larger group of employees are denied investment and development

opportunities (De Vos and Dries, 2013). Fleming argues that human capital theory has enabled organisations to ‘reimagine’ the idea of employees and divest themselves of responsibility to the individual (2017, p.691). De Vos and Dries similarly link the ‘rhetoric’ about the ‘death’ of the organisational career to the development of a ‘winner-takes-all’ mentality in the labour market itself (2013, p.1828). Certainly, if theories about organisational careers can contribute to changing the labour market itself, then it is crucial to recognise that how career development is conceptualised matters (De Vos and Dries, 2013).

The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (2017) found that in the twenty-first century, some UK sectors had altered beyond recognition due to factors such as globalisation, technology, and the development of a gig economy based on temporary employment. The UK public sector, including HE, has also experienced shifts in the labour market with the introduction of private-sector management tenets and changes to employee relations (Gander, Girardi and Paull, 2019; Ishaq and Hussain, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic intensified change in all sectors with disruption that has reshaped the workplace (Crowley and Overton, 2021). The Taylor Review (2017) also found evidence that development opportunities in the workplace were more accessible to highly skilled workers, who were four times more likely to receive further training than those without an existing skill-set. The Resolution Foundation (Rahman, 2019) report stark statistics about the higher likelihood of poverty among women, disabled people, and people of colour with these probabilities increasing in an intersectional context. This data illustrates the UK context for Decent Work (International Labor Organisation, No date), which now forms part of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, No date) and has been prioritised by UK policymakers seeking to promote social justice (Dodd, Hooley and Burke, 2019). Careers and employment in the UK are areas with a significant level of social injustice and in this way improving access to organisational career development can help to build social justice and challenge organisations about the ‘deal’ on offer to their employees. Specifically, this study is interested in how UK HEIs promote social justice in their organisational approaches to career development.

Research suggests there may be issues with both the strategy and implementation of organisational career development. In 2020, the Corporate Research Forum (CRF)

surveyed 140 employers and asked questions about approaches to career development based on a previous survey carried out in 2003. In evaluating the findings, Hirsh's (2021) research suggests that organisational objectives related to career development are not clearly defined or understood: 'half the respondents had a career development strategy […] less than 40% communicated a clear statement on career development to all staff' (Hirsh, 2021, p.51).

Many organisations are not confident about their career development strategy – what it entails, who should deliver it or who should benefit from it (Hirsh, 2021). Career development is also difficult to situate in organisational structures. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the UK's professional body for human resources (HR), does not consider career development to be an essential skill for HR professionals (Hirsh, 2021) and research has suggested this is an area where HR responsibilities have been devolved to line-managers (Renwick and Macneil, 2002). It is arguable that different findings might be possible across a wider profile of participating organisations than those in the CRF survey. However, this small-scale study builds on these findings by providing an insight into the perceptions of PS line-managers about organisational strategy and where responsibility lies for career development – with individuals, with line-managers, or with wider organisational systems of support.

Within the context of the HE sector, the careers of university PS staff is an under-researched area (Gander, 2021; Ishaq and Hussain, 2022) but one where further research is merited given the complexity of PS roles in large, corporatised, and regulated institutions (Gander, 2021). Existing research has also explored the roles of third space professionals and practitioners, considering questions of identity, recognition, worth, and relationships in work which blurs and re-defines more binary academic and professional service spaces (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). Previous research has also identified that the lack of practices that support career progression of PS staff is a strategic issue for the sector to address (Gander, Girardi and Paull, 2019). Specifically, empirical research has identified the way in which some PS staff feel stuck and at a dead-end in their career (Gander, 2021). Research also shows that tensions around approaches such as talent management are heightened in the public sector because of a distinctive adherence to values such as fairness (Kravariti et al., 2022) and to embedding equality and diversity through consistency of treatment (Harris and Foster, 2010). It appears there is both significant

uncertainty in organisations about career development and complexity around these issues for the public sector and HE specifically. These are gaps in the research which this study addresses by seeking the views of line-managers themselves and focusing on staff in PS roles in UK HEIs.

Previous research has found line-managers to be key to holding career conversations (Crawshaw, 2006; Crawshaw and Game, 2015; Hirsh, 2015). At the same time, research has found the role of the wider organisational community to be crucial in supporting career development effectively (Kidd, Hirsh and Jackson, 2004; Bosley, Arnold and Cohen, 2009). In terms of the nature of effective career conversations, practical career help and information-giving has been shown to be perceived as positive (Kidd, Hirsh and Jackson, 2004; Bosley, Arnold and Cohen, 2009). Topics and questions exploring not just what people do now but what they might like to do in the future differentiate a career conversation from a performance conversation (Hirsh, 2015). Skills in facilitation and in challenging and giving feedback are also valued (Kidd, Hirsh and Jackson, 2004). However, questions have been raised about the training and ability of line-managers with some employers considering this a ‘barrier’ to effective career development being carried out (Hirsh, 2021, p.51). In this respect, research on coaching in organisations is also relevant. While previously coaching was typically provided only to senior managers through an external coach (Frigerio, 2016), it is now often deployed as a career development tool by encouraging managers to coach their teams in a work context (McCarthy and Milner, 2013). But organisations often fail to recognise the ways in which coaching interactions are inherently different with a line-manager tasked with coaching rather than with an external coach, and challenges exist in training line-managers effectively to do this (McCarthy and Milner, 2013). This study therefore investigates line-managers’ views and perceptions in relation to responsibility for career conversations and staff career development.

These studies consider the role of line-managers and career conversations, but do not analyse the views of line-managers themselves. This is a relevant gap in the research and it is arguable that we do not know enough about the point of view of line-managers on their role and responsibilities in relation to holding career conversations. This gap is significant because it may provide specific insights into whether line-managers feel they need support to hold effective career discussions, and what that support might look like. This qualitative

study therefore contributes to research in this area by seeking the views and experiences of line-managers directly and evaluating these in relation to questions of social justice and 'career' concepts that are also relevant to the wider issue of third space professionals and career progression.

Methodology

This qualitative research project explored the experiences of line-managers in professional services in UK HEIs in holding career conversations. Qualitative research was undertaken because of its suitability in exploring the experiences of participants from their perspective (Berg, 2001), and the project is underpinned by interpretivist epistemology (Guba and Lincoln, 1986). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews informed by the Participant-Centred Approach (PCA) to qualitative research interviewing (McCrory and O'Donnell, 2016) which advocates a participant-led ethos focused on facilitating accounts of lived experience and which provides guidance on the application of practical interviewing skills, such as active listening and the use of reflective skills to open up dialogue. The interview schedule which participants were sent in advance comprised six questions designed around the research aims and key points raised by the literature review. For example, question one asked a broad question inviting participants to talk about their experiences of holding career conversations as a line-manager and question three asked about the skills and abilities line-managers consider they use in holding career conversations.

Opportunity sampling and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants (Mabry, 2009). All participants were required to have at least one year of line-management experience and judgements were made to try and secure representation from participants in a range of institutions and roles. The recruitment strategy involved using social media and posting on the researcher's LinkedIn account. In addition, the researcher had contacts in UK HEIs who were able to assist with publicising. Because the researcher has a background of working in careers services a disproportionate number of volunteers had a careers background. Eight participants were recruited from across five institutions. This included institutions in Wales, England, and Scotland and a mix of Russell Group and other university groups. Four participants had a career development background and four

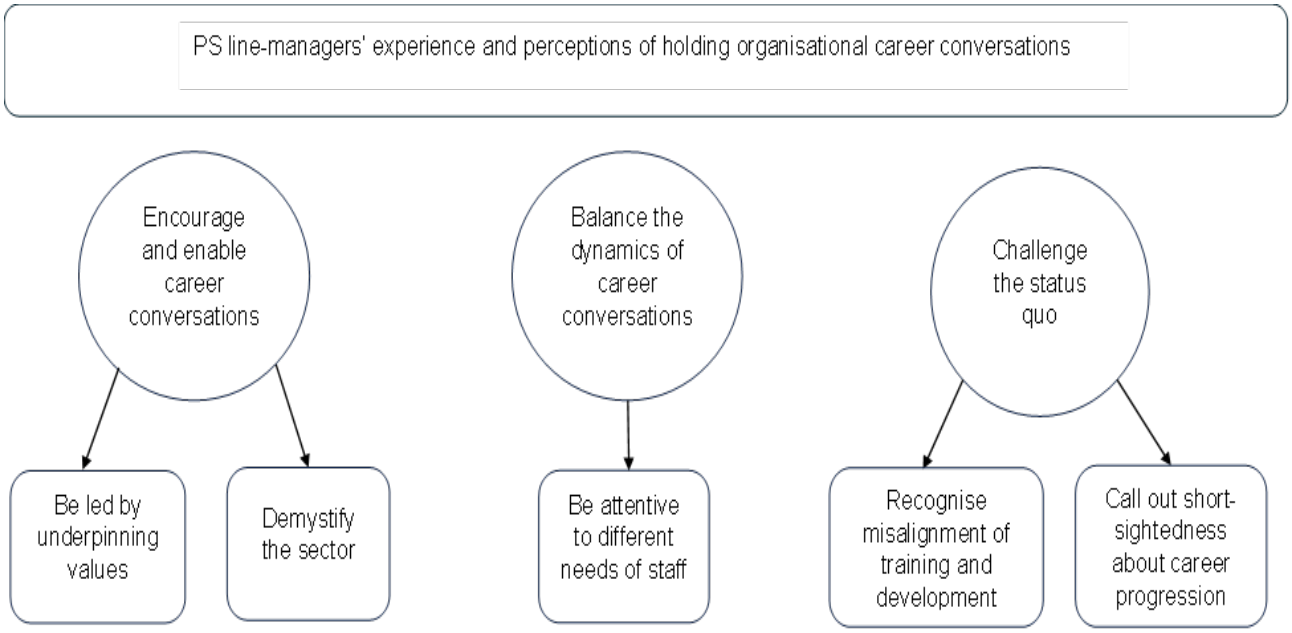
had backgrounds in areas such as department, faculty or college management, and student support services. Interviews lasting between 45 minutes and one hour were conducted virtually and digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance for inductive thematic analysis.

The research methodology for this project involving human participants was developed in accordance with the University of the West of Scotland policies regarding the ethical conduct of research and approved by the School of Education and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Findings

Three themes were identified with sub-themes

Figure 1: Thematic Map of Findings.



1. Encourage and enable career conversations

This theme reflects the active role participants described in facilitating career conversations, as highlighted by the language used to characterise this aspect of their work: 'That's probably where you are more, I guess, as a line-manager proactively, umm, encouraging and enabling those conversations' (participant 6).

All of the participants expressed a level of confidence in their ability to hold career conversations and previous experience in either line-management or career guidance was helpful for many. One participant highlighted that career conversations in formal scenarios such as an annual review can be difficult, if they are perceived as a 'directive from HR' (participant 8). But most participants described facilitating career conversations effectively across formal and informal scenarios, including the way in which career conversations can arise spontaneously. Encouraging and enabling, as characterised by the participants, involves a range of skills. There were clear areas of commonality in the skills that participants mentioned using in holding career conversations, which included empathy, active listening, and open-ended questions, as well as the ability to use silence and a willingness to challenge.

2. Be led by underpinning values

Participants linked this area of their role and responsibilities to values important to them in the workplace. Participants expressed this in different ways but there was a clear perception that this aspect of their work mattered. Many participants expressed a clear resolve to focus on fairness: 'it's really important to treat everyone the same and give them that first starting point' (participant 3). Other participants reported on the ways in which their own experiences had influenced their thinking about supporting colleagues: 'There was no expectations on us ever to go university. So, I just followed suit and just went in the factory like many people do …. So, I'm always interested in, "do you have a career plan?" Because I never had one myself' (participant 8).

Participants therefore recognised aspects of social context influencing their thinking and interest in career development. Lastly, there was also a sense of the importance that participants attached to taking action in a line-management role by 'making sure that those conversations aren't just conversations' (participant 5) to provide tangible opportunities for their staff. There was also a shared emphasis on the importance of ensuring staff feel valued: 'People need to feel a sense of self-worth in what they do and that it's meaningful work for them is, is, I think, really critical' (participant 2).

3. Demystify the sector

There was a shared view among participants that a key part of encouraging and enabling career conversations is to pass on information about how the sector works with regards to career development: ‘The main challenge I think, particularly when … speaking with people who are new to HE, is trying to, I suppose, communicate how HE, what HE careers look like, what HE administrative careers look like’ (participant 4).

Participants portrayed quite a specific line-manager role here in demystifying career pathways and progression routes, using their own career experiences and learning about progression within the sector to benefit others. This included some participants using language around systems and processes. This was not necessarily expressed as a negative, more as a pragmatic recognition of working in large institutions: ‘I try to take the blinkers off them all to see this, the university is a big set of processes’ (participant 1).

4. Balance the dynamics of career conversations

This theme highlights the different ways in which participants characterised individual agency, organisational context, and their own roles as line-managers trying to meet the varying needs of different staff members. This theme was initially identified through the use of language about a balancing act: ‘Sometimes that that kind of balancing act between the needs of the individual and the needs of the team and the needs of the institution’ (participant 6).

Many participants expressed a sense of shared responsibility for career development. All apart from one participant felt the individual was primarily responsible, just not in isolation. Participants talked about everyone having a role to play or how a ‘Venn diagram’ could be drawn showing individual, line-manager and organisational areas of responsibility (participant 2). There was an acknowledgement that organisational needs and individual career development priorities do not necessarily always run in parallel, but some participants spoke positively about using career conversations as a ‘mechanism’ for finding ‘synergy’ between the two (participant 4). However, some participants also referred to accepting an element of discomfort in the line-manager role related to this.

5. Be attentive to different needs of staff

Participants reported recognising and responding to the fact that the career needs and ambitions of individuals vary. There was a shared understanding among many participants about staff who are not interested in developing their careers. One participant characterised this as people interested in ‘career sustainability’ rather than ‘career development’ (participant 3). Some participants expressed a level of acceptance of this, and others described finding it ‘a little bit frustrating’ because their offers to support a member of staff were declined (participant 1). However, line-managers also described managing a very different type of person – individuals who are ‘always looking ahead as to where they want to be’ (participant 7) and who are proactive about their career development.

6. Challenge the status quo

The theme ‘challenge the status quo’ identifies participants’ views on the ways in which training and development and career progression for professional services staff is carried out in the HE sector. Some participants noted areas of good practice. One institution was described as ‘forward thinking’ (participant 6), and others were recognised for offering initiatives such as secondments, mentoring or work shadowing, or for making training and development opportunities open to ‘everybody within this working environment’ (participant 8). However, many participants also reported gaps and issues. The theme was initially identified through this sense of frustration and the ideas expressed about how things could be done differently: ‘So, understanding how big institutions work and how you access and … actually support your staff member. Umm … that’s the bit that I’ve always found really frustrating’ (participant 6).

7. Recognise the misalignment of training and development

There was a shared view among many participants that there is a misalignment between what training and development should look like and the form it currently takes: ‘Umm, so it’s, the university’s almost a bit, umm … misaligned as to where things need to be supported and where they actually think the support needs to be’ (participant 1).

Some participants noted that ‘career development can be conflated with training and development opportunities and courses’ (participant 3). Others questioned whether the nature of training needs a conceptual overhaul to think more broadly about what it means: ‘You know, we need to be talking about, “What is staff development?” ... And, you know, it’s not just going on courses’ (participant 7).

Notably, participant ideas concerning how things could be done differently in training and development ranged widely. Some participants focused on ways to make training more informal with greater use of peer-to-peer learning. Other participants expressed concern about a lack of investment and funding for externally accredited professional qualifications. Operational issues concerning the way that training and development is delivered were also raised, with online and flexible delivery methods not seen to be deployed sufficiently.

Many participants reported that as line-managers they had not received any training related to holding career conversations. However, overall, responses to this were mixed. Some did not feel training was necessary. Some of those with a careers background considered that their pre-existing training was beneficial. Others felt a lack of training or commented that it was currently too focused on ‘discipline’ and not enough on how to ‘support the people that we’re working with’ (participant 7). One participant questioned whether line-managers need more training in how to be a line-manager per se and not just in relation to career conversations. Some participants suggested there needs to be more of a community of peer support, because it can be ‘a little bit isolating in a management role’ (participant 5).

Some participants had undertaken coaching training and referred to this:

> I genuinely think if higher education was to really take coaching seriously and embed it. Embed … a coaching approach … with its line managers throughout an institution. I think you would see, like, really significant returns on investment (participant 3).

8. Call out short-sightedness about career progression

Career progression was another area where participants expressed both frustration with how institutions currently support this and ideas of how things could be improved. Some obstacles identified were external factors such as increased competition in the local labour market leading to a turnover of staff, while others were identified as being inherent to the sector:

> And it concerns me that universities sometimes become, I think, both status-driven and hierarchical and … you risk losing out on potential and talent … So, I think my reflection, and it's a personal view, is that universities and the sector as a whole need to invest far more in their sort of less-experienced, lower-grade staff and start to create more of a talent pipeline. At the moment it feels predicated too much on jumping from grade to grade… you're trying to navigate these, these impenetrable structures. So, I think that's where I'd like to see change happen (participant 2).

One participant had recently been involved in an initiative around succession planning but other participants mentioned the lack of support for what might be termed the tactics of career development to help staff progress, such as building confidence for applications, tests, and interview performance: 'actually speaking of career training, we don't do any kind of interview training at all …' (participant 7).

Discussion

The findings from this study contribute a new dimension to existing research in three areas:

1. Line-managers value career conversations and feel equipped to hold them

The literature review identified relevant gaps in the research where studies considered the role of line-managers and career conversations, but did not analyse the views of line-managers themselves. This study has therefore sought to build upon this existing research and the key finding was that line-managers both value holding career conversations as part of their role and responsibilities, and reported that they feel equipped to hold career

conversations with staff.

Previous employer research had identified line-manager ability as a potential 'barrier' to effective career development (Hirsh, 2021, p.51). However, participants all reported a level of confidence in holding career conversations. It is not possible from the scope of this project to provide conclusive answers about why this discrepancy in findings arises. Half of this study's participants had a background in career development, and this may have influenced the results. Yet, it is notable that the responses of line-managers had a high level of commonality with previous research on the skills needed to hold career conversations, and the topics and questions discussed in them (Kidd, Hirsh and Jackson, 2004; Hirsh, 2015). Research had also raised questions about the training available to line-managers for holding career conversations (McCarthy and Milner, 2013; Hirsh, 2021). This study found mixed views about training. One of the more prevalent views was that greater use needs to be made of peer-to-peer learning and some participants advocated for line-managers to receive coaching training that could assist them in all aspects of their role. There are opportunities for further research here to unpick the current state and status of line-management training in UK HEIs and explore the ideas expressed.

This study also found that PS line-managers in UK HEIs value this aspect of their role and responsibilities. The literature review raised questions about whether responsibility for career development had been devolved to line-managers from HR (Renwick and MacNeil, 2002). Here, the findings were that HR was only mentioned either in relation to training and development or the occasional 'directive' around processes like annual review. Far from resenting this aspect of their role, many participants spoke positively about their responsibilities for career development which echoes research about the importance of the line-manager relationship in organisational career development (Crawshaw, 2006; Crawshaw and Game, 2015). Further research could seek the views of HR professionals in the sector, to complement the line-manager perspectives expressed here.

2. Organisational support needs re-evaluation

The literature review identified a relevant gap in the research about line-manager views on holding career conversations, whether they need support to fulfil this aspect of their role and what that support might look like. Line-managers in this study did feel they needed

more support to hold career conversations. However, it was not support in terms of building their skills, abilities, or confidence. Rather, it was support in terms of the organisational back-up that lies behind a career conversation when they are trying to make things happen for their staff. To facilitate the line-manager role and help individuals access opportunities more easily, institutions could refine and improve policies and processes and increase the support on offer. The literature review identified that because of growing levels of structural inequality in UK society, access to organisational career development is a social justice issue (Dodd, Hooley and Burke, 2019; Rahman, 2019). Arguably, if line-manager participants consider they need more organisational back-up to hold effective career conversations, this would suggest institutions can do more to promote social justice through their approach to career development.

There was evidence of participants utilising a hybrid career concept in which there are elements of reciprocal responsibility for career management between the organisation and the individual (Gander, 2021) with line-managers describing an ability to find creative ways to 'balance' organisational and individual needs. Participants articulated a career development partnership but one in which the individual has to take the lead and play a stronger part (Hirsh, 2021). However, participants also considered that individuals and line-managers lack key aspects of organisational infrastructure to support this partnership around both training and development, and career progression. If there is some congruence in the UK HE sector about how this career development partnership *should* work then efforts could instead be focused on how to make the partnership *actually* work in practice as effectively as possible. For example, Hirsh found that less than 40% of organisations communicate a 'clear statement' on career development to staff (2021, p.51). HEIs could work with employees to put together a clear career development strategy which is transparent about roles and responsibilities in this partnership, including what the organisation can provide, and how line-managers support staff.

Moreover, there are conceptual issues about the nature of training and development within HE and how it links to PS career development which need to be untangled here. It is important to acknowledge that some participants did highlight areas of good practice in this aspect of staff support. But ideas for doing things differently were wide-ranging and reflect conclusions from previous research about the need to recognise the complexity, professionalism, and impact of PS roles (Gander, Girardi and Paull, 2019). It is highly

relevant for HEIs to be re-evaluating this now, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the fundamental change this has brought to the workplace and to learning and development delivery (Crowley and Overton, 2021).

3. Barriers to career progression need to be addressed

This study builds on existing research by examining the perceptions of line-managers in relation to the 'deal' which HE organisations are offering staff for career development and progression. Gander, Girardi and Paull's (2019) research identified that the lack of HR practices to support career progression is a barrier in the sector. In this study, two key barriers to career progression were raised by PS line-managers. Firstly, line-managers perceived barriers in prescriptive and limited progression practices exacerbated by a lack of training and development support for staff wishing to move on in their career. Line-managers also described the 'career sustainability' of people they manage who have no interest in developing or progressing their careers. This finding links to Gander's research on the career profiles of PS staff including a profile titled 'dead-end' (2021, p.862). It is not possible to know from this study's findings to what extent 'career sustainability' staff correspond to the 'dead-end' profile or differ from it. But it is further evidence from HE line-managers of the prevalence of staff in the sector who either do not wish to, or do not feel able to, progress in their career. Critical social justice advocates space for alternative career choices and 'meanings' for career – and this may be what 'career sustainability' represents (Irving, 2020, p.189). Undoubtedly, further research is needed here to analyse what is happening and why.

A second barrier to career progression was highlighted by the very specific role depicted for line-managers in explaining how the 'system' works and how to navigate the challenges of progressing a career in professional services. Participants described a need to demystify the sector because of an opaqueness to career pathways which staff might struggle to see clearly without line-manager support. The depiction of this lack of transparency is concerning because of the ways in which access to career development is a social justice issue (Dodd, Hooley and Burke, 2019). Arguably, organisations could do more to promote social justice in their approach to career development including clarifying career specialisms and pathways in the sector. These findings also raise relevant questions about how careers and potential are nurtured for PS staff in UK HEIs. It could be

that the sector finds the selective focus on specific employees via approaches like ‘talent management’ problematic to negotiate alongside public sector values related to fairness and equality of opportunity (Harris and Foster, 2010; Kravariti et al., 2022). But another explanation offered by existing literature is that universities do not always value their PS staff very highly and are therefore less invested in their career development (De Vos and Dries, 2013; Gander, Girardi and Paull, 2019).

In terms of facilitating access to career development within this imperfect ‘system’, line-managers and organisations had a focus on fairness. This corroborates the findings of previous studies on consistency of treatment in the public sector (Harris and Foster, 2010; Ishaq and Hussain, 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022). In this study, the finding may also have been influenced by the fact that half of the participants had a career development background, where fairness is important to professional practice. At the same time, some participants noted social context as important in their approach to supporting staff with career development. Therefore, there are potential implications in relation to ‘fairness’ and how it should be interpreted and implemented in organisational practice, if we understand that approaches are framed by context (Rahman, 2019; Ishaq and Hussain, 2022). There is evidence of HE institutions focusing on embedding equality and diversity in organisational strategies and practices through approaches which more overtly seek to champion equality and diversity than simply to ensure consistency of treatment (Advance HE, 2014; 2021). Further research could examine how conceptions of ‘fairness’ are applied in this and other public sector settings and examine different ways in which social context can and should influence contemporary organisational career development practice.

Limitations

One limitation is the small sample size of eight participants. However, the aim of this qualitative research was not to generalise findings, but to focus on ‘interpretive data’ drawn from the experiences of participants (Oplatka, 2021, p.1886). The researcher has a background in career development in the UK HE sector, with the result that four of the participants were also career development professionals. Assuming that career development professionals have more than a passing interest in career conversations as

line-managers, the aim was to balance this with another four participants who do not have this background or training. While the researcher knew some of the participants through her network and worked alone on the project without another researcher to corroborate or challenge the themes identified, she engaged reflexively with the research to maintain a level of awareness about any potential impact from a personal connection to the topic.

Conclusions

In conclusion, PS line-managers in UK HEIs felt a lack of organisational back-up when holding career conversations and identified barriers to career progression. These should arguably be a priority to address, particularly given the ways in which promoting access to organisational career development can promote social justice. HEIs could re-evaluate the nature and the extent of the support available to individuals and line-managers to build and progress their PS careers. There was evidence of a hybrid career concept in which there are elements of reciprocal responsibility for career management between the organisation and the individual, so HEI approaches could include clarifying the role of organisational support and how HR professionals contribute to that. The findings suggest that PS line-managers already have ideas concerning how things could be done differently to support staff more effectively. It could be valuable for HEIs to surface these ideas to influence change including in the third space where there are broader issues related to recognition, support and fit within institutional structures. Initiatives for change might lead to clear messages for staff around career development as well as improvements to training and development, for example, introducing more tangible development opportunities, more scope for career conversations, and more peer-to-peer support. Tackling barriers to career progression for PS staff may also be valuable for sector-wide bodies such as Advance HE, Universities UK and the Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) to address in guidance and recommendations for policies and practice at institutional level.

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Licence