Chapter 4

The changing roles and responsibilities of administrative and support staff

Key points

New roles: administrative and support staff are now playing an increasingly central role in higher education, as a result of three key developments:

- the growth of information technology;
- changes in the delivery of higher education;
- the development of an 'enterprise culture' within higher education.

Information Technology (IT): growing usage of IT had involved all administrative and support staff in a wider range and a higher level of functions than they had previously undertaken.

Changes in delivery: had impacted on staff in a number of ways:

- modularisation and semesterisation had meant some staff were increasingly involved in the planning and management of courses;
- academic staff had begun to delegate more tasks to administrative staff so they were increasingly playing a role in training and teaching students both informally and formally; and
- a shift towards an 'independent-learning' environment also required some staff to play a greater role in teaching.

The enterprise culture: staff were involved in work relating to 'value for money' and fundraising, and were adapting to a new 'management culture'.

Additional responsibilities: most staff welcomed the opportunity to undertake additional responsibilities:

- they were concerned that they did not receive enough support;
- their new roles and responsibilities were not recognised;
- they had responsibility without power.

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The changing roles and responsibilities of administrative and support staff

Introduction

4.1 This chapter traces an even more significant development than the expanding workloads of administrative and support staff outlined in Chapter 3. It explores and illustrates the higher profile of administrative and support functions within higher education and of the staff undertaking these functions. In particular, it highlights the increasingly central role that administrative and support staff were playing in the delivery, rather than simply the administration of higher education.

The growth of information technology in higher education

4.2 All the administrative and support staff in the group discussions noted the increasingly central role of information technology (IT) in the administration and delivery of higher education. This impacted on the roles and responsibilities of all of them and especially those in computing support functions. The expansion of IT heralded a new range of responsibilities but its effect varied depending on the occupation of each staff member.

Computing support staff
4.3 The most significant impact of the growth of IT for computing support staff was the increase in the numbers of people requiring access to computing and IT resources and support. This had also resulted in an expansion in the range and level of work that they were required to undertake.

4.4 The integral role that IT now plays in higher education meant that computing support staff have had to adapt to a much wider range of competence levels than had previously been the case. Balancing the complex computing problems of computer science students with the more basic word-processing needs of other students was an added pressure. It was particularly the case for staff who had encountered students or other staff whose computing expertise exceeded their own.

4.5 It was not only the growing numbers of *student* users that had altered the roles and responsibilities of computing staff. The increasing use of computing and IT in higher education administration has also made computing support staff responsible for the needs of more staff more than ever before. As a result, computing support staff have had to adapt their skills and expertise to deal with a much wider range of users. One explained:

> '... ten years ago, computing was for the physicist, or the experts... Now everybody does it, including the secretaries. So although we're in the academic computing service, we're responsible for the non-academic things.'

4.6 Attempts to balance the needs of individual departments with a centrally administered system of computing support was a further source of tension. Computing staff felt that departments perceived them as unwilling to respond to their needs. In reality, they felt that they were simply unable to satisfy everyone's needs and demands. An information services manager explained:

> 'It's a tension you see, because we traditionally... are supporting academic teaching, but not the payroll, not your admin-type things. It all used to be done by experts in that section. Now... everyone is a computing person. And a lot of people... want [computers and software]

for doing their own thing, and... we tend to be more bureaucratic... Any changes we make we get... flack from somebody else, so we get more sluggish to change. Therefore, we're not so responsive to people... so there is a problem.'

Library staff

4.7 Library staff had also experienced a significant change in their roles and responsibilities as a result of the growth in IT. Particularly important was the impact of changes in the nature of the technological developments related to their work.

4.8 They reported that computer-based learning was becoming an increasingly central part of higher education. Library staff spoke of a *'massive increase'* of IT in libraries, and one described it as a *'technology race'*. Several worked in institutions where libraries had become learning resource centres which were heavily reliant on IT. Two worked in a library which had been merged with the computer services department in their institution.

4.9 The growth of IT had altered the working lives of library staff in a number of ways. They found themselves in a constant race to keep up with the latest developments in IT. The pressure on them to familiarise themselves with, and become competent in the use of, a wider range of materials, was enormous. A library assistant explained:

> *'Now there are dozens of databases which I personally am not trained in, but the users expect me to know every single thing about all of them.'*

4.10 Additional pressure also stemmed from the fact that staff felt that they were unable to keep up with users' expectations of services. One subject librarian explained:

> *'We've just got the pressure of so many new information sources which are IT- based. The pressure for us to provide them for people, and really, you know, we feel we're caught in the lag between the sources we know are available and what we can provide.'*

4.11 Library staff also felt that they had to spend a great deal of time trying to reconcile real resource constraints with perceptions, among staff and students, of electronic sources as *'the be all and end all'*. A systems manger said: *'All the students expect everything to be electronic. I don't know why they expect it...'*. A subject librarian also described a prevalent attitude among senior management in higher education that: *'... we must have everything electronic because it shows we're a forward-looking institution. If we haven't got electronics stuff then we're not doing it properly'*.

4.12 Staff were very aware that they frequently had to disappoint users because their library lacked the resources to buy all the IT students and staff required. They claimed that they spent a lot of time explaining why sources could not be provided.[8]

4.13 The most significant change in the role of library staff stemmed from the growing amount of support that students needed in order to *'find their way around a library'*. A subject librarian explained:

> *'Just the huge amount of resources available, it's harder for students to work out what's important... what they should be reading. Because they've got the Internet, they've got the CD-ROMS, they've got the hard copy...'*

4.14 An assistant subject librarian described an experience which was common to all library staff.

> *'... the number of students who walk in, just hearing about this [CD-ROM], expect that is the end answer to all their problems. And they come in and they say, "Can I have a CD?" and then you just ask them "Which CD?"... [and they say] "Oh a CD, whatever you call it"... so you do it [for them] because... probing to say "Which CD? What subject?" [takes too long].'*

Technical support staff

4.15 Technical and support staff reported a less dramatic change in their role, as a result of the growth in information technology in higher education, compared to other support and administrative staff. Most noted the wider range of IT sources that they were encountering as part of their work. One said:

> '... as well as linking in with computing, we've also started taking on things like video conferencing and stuff like that. So we're actually expanding beyond computing, incorporating other technologies as well.'

4.16 The impact of technological advances on technical support staff was much less significant compared to that on computing staff or librarians for two main reasons. First, the use of new technological sources was an integral element of technicians' work and so the nature of their work had not changed significantly. Second, they were less affected by the increase in IT users than other groups, primarily because they were attached to specific departments rather than providing a core function. Thus, the numbers of staff and students that they were required to support were limited.

Administrators

4.17 The role of administrators in higher education had altered quite dramatically as a result of developments in IT. Both the introduction of personal computers, which had reduced the need for secretaries and typists, and the move to computerised records and systems in central and departmental administration, had led to changes. One long-serving administrator, who had joined higher education as a secretary described the change in her remit. She said: 'I'm [now] very much more of a coordinator... [I was a personal secretary]'.

4.18 The focus of administrators' discussions around IT was on the databases many of them were required to set up and maintain as part of their work. This was a significant development in administrators' work. One joked:

> 'This is like the BT advert. You're not being asked to work harder, because you haven't got the people to throw at the job, what you've got to do is work smarter. Smarter, these days, involves IT.'

4.19 Many staff were happy to use these databases. In fact, several of the newer administrators had been the main force in introducing computerised records systems in their departments. They were all aware, however, of colleagues who were having great difficulties adapting to IT developments. They found this unsettling.

4.20 Administrators also highlighted a number of problems they faced due to the absence of a strong IT infrastructure within their institutions. For instance, several had suffered as a result of having computers which were not up-to-date or powerful enough for the tasks for which they were used. One explained:

> 'We suffer quite badly. We have computers that crash and we can't get new computers... my computer isn't strong enough... and we haven't any money to buy new ones, so I can't actually get into the central university.'

4.21 Reconciling their IT needs with inadequate equipment took up a great deal of some administrators' time.

4.22 Department administrators were also often frustrated at being unable to access databases held in other departments. One explained:

> 'We've got a [central] student records system... the money was there a while ago to actually set this up, and it is running as a central admin system. But there wasn't the money to actually farm it out to the departments, to upgrade the equipment...'

4.23 The inability to reconcile departmental records with central records ruled out information-sharing and necessitated duplication of work. Administrators also noted a shortage of the back-up and support services they felt they needed. They found this frustrating and demotivating and expressed a strong feeling that the lack of a well-supported and maintained IT infrastructure was as important a resource constraint as the absence of computer hardware.

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Changes in the delivery of higher education

4.24 One of the most significant changes in the role of administrative and support functions that staff discussed related to changes occurring in the delivery of higher education. These developments had taken a number of forms.

The organisation of courses and the academic year

4.25 The move towards modularisation and semesterisation had made less of an impact on the administrative and support staff in the focus groups than might have been anticipated. Several staff explained that although their institution ran modular courses in theory this had made little difference to the way courses were run.

4.26 Administrators, particularly those working in '1992 universities' were most affected by the practical implications of modularisation. They indicated that modular courses involved more administrative tasks than individual courses. One explained:

> 'They... [need] a lot more administration because there's so many different choices in modular - rather than just doing a biology course, [they're] doing a biology course ... with fifty different options you can take with it...'

4.27 Others commented on the complexity of administering modular courses. One course administrator working in arts and humanities had struggled with the logistical problems of combining diverse courses under modular schemes:

> 'It's very slow... Arts has got a kind of modular system but they're not at all compatible. So if somebody from an Arts subject wanted to take a Science unit it's virtually impossible.'

4.28 These developments meant that administrators were more involved in a range of tasks associated with the planning and management of courses than had previously been the case.

A more 'academic' role[9]

4.29 The most striking change in the role of administrative and support staff related to their increasing involvement in more academic work. They attributed this to:

- the increasing burdens on academic staff due to rising student numbers; and, in turn,
- the necessity for academics to delegate some of their responsibilities to administrative and support staff.

4.30 All the administrative and support staff reported a growing involvement in teaching functions. For librarians, computing and technical support staff this largely took the form of a training role. These staff explained and instructed students in the use of the equipment and data sources required for their courses. One commented: '*When job evaluation comes in, all the universities will have a shock. Because we teach them how to sit exams, we teach careers education... I teach a lot now... I teach alongside academics.*' Staff viewed the task of '*teaching students how to learn*' as one which had previously been the responsibility of academics.

4.31 Technical support staff reported having a more formal role in delivering courses to students. They took tutorials, seminars and even gave lectures in order to free academics for other things. A laboratory technician in a 'pre-1992 university' was also supervising the practical work of postgraduate students. In addition, a technical assistant in the humanities department of an 'pre-1992 university' who had a strong subject base was involved in writing up research findings for academic papers.

4.32 Department administrators were also undertaking more tasks previously carried out by academics and were becoming increasingly central to the operation of teaching departments. One said:

> 'I think that because the academics are asked to set income targets, they have to bring in income, and so they want to concentrate on it. So they're shifting a lot of the stuff... tasks that were undertaken by them in the past, on to administrators and secretarial staff. So they can free themselves to go and get money.'

4.33 This shift had had important effects on department administrators. One course administrator explained:

> '... in the old days academics tended to perhaps have a secretary... and the academics would be much more responsible for what happened, but I think now administration has got so very much more complicated... it's now... the 'secretary' who has that knowledge, the academic doesn't have that knowledge. So the academic can't have that responsibility, which in the old days... he or she might have.'

4.34 The central role of these staff in delivering, rather than simply supporting, higher education meant that knowledge was more evenly dispersed within departments. Even if academics had the time to maintain their role as the 'figureheads' of particular departments and courses, they no longer had the knowledge base to do so effectively.

Independent learning[10]

4.35 Most of the administrative and support staff had noticed a shift in the delivery of higher education away from traditional, labour-intensive methods revolving around academic staff and towards 'student-centred' packages. One librarian explained:

> 'They're freeing the lecturing staff.. so instead of standing in a lecture and teaching... they're finding a way to deliver courses... [that]... are more student-centred type of learning, because the lecturer just gives an outline and says now go and do it...'

4.36 It could be argued that an independent-learning environment, however, requires two things:

- an injection of time and resources to ensure that students are able to take responsibility for their own learning; and
- a student body which is willing to take responsibility for their own learning.

4.37 The administrative and support staff, in particular those working in libraries, suggested that these requirements were not being met.

4.38 First, staff pointed out that most academic staff no longer had either the time or the knowledge to provide students with the information and skills needed to direct their own studies. One subject librarian remarked: '*Well... half the academics don't know the databases themselves'.*

4.39 Second, library staff, in particular, felt that many students were ill-prepared for an independent-learning environment. Some had entered higher education with unrealistic expectations of the teaching they would receive. They also noted a more general trend towards students who were increasingly demanding (Chapter 3). Staff felt that these students were highly resistant to independent learning. It usually fell back on library staff, who were 'on the front line', to provide the direction these students

needed. One said: *'You don't see them prepared to do the work themselves, they want you to provide it for them... and they won't take no...'*.

4.40 In addition, staff noted that some students were unable to cope with independent learning, especially students who did not speak English as their first language. An assistant subject librarian described an occurrence which was familiar to many other library staff:

> *'... this girl... said "I want to look at these journals which are marked as Internet". I said, "Have you attended classes which dealt with Internet?" She said, "Yes, but I couldn't understand anything of what the lady was saying, so can you explain?" '*

4.41 Staff also reported having to deal with students' fear of IT which made them reluctant to tackle the complex electronic data sources required for independent learning.

4.42 Library staff believed that academics were unaware of students' problems because they had become so removed from the teaching process. Again, being on the front line, library staff felt that they had no choice but to 'fill in the gaps' for these students.

Enterprise in higher education

4.43 Several staff felt that their role in higher education had been changed by the shift towards a more 'business like' culture. One described the changes and problems that this had brought to the higher education sector:

> *'... we're developing what I call the 'baked beans society'. If we sold baked beans we could have a profit and loss account, it's easy. But ... how much profit on one hundred undergraduates who graduate... fifty pence each? A million pounds each? How do you put a profit and loss relationship on turning through students. And that's what they want, you know, commercial ideas, commercial profit-and-loss accountability. But how do you put a value on education?'*

Accountability
4.44 Most of the staff in the focus groups commented on an increased accountability for funds. This usually took the form of a push towards delivering a more 'customer- oriented' service and a focus on 'value for money'. These requirements impacted directly on administrative and support staff.

4.45 Staff who worked in central functions - such as librarians and computing support - found themselves increasingly vulnerable to central/departmental tensions. This stemmed from the fact that, in some institutions, teaching departments were required to pay a proportion of their budgets towards funding central resources. In the context of widespread cuts in departmental budgets, the amount of money contributed by departments to central functions was increasingly being questioned. In addition, departmental staff often resented the requirement to pay for a service over which they had no choice or control. As a result, central administrative and support staff found themselves spending more and more time coping with internal politics and trying to 'justify their existence'.

Fundraising
4.46 Staff noted that higher education institutions, and departments within them, were increasingly developing a responsibility for raising funds in response to the financial constraints affecting the sector. In turn, this was altering the roles and responsibilities of administrative and support staff in a number of ways.

4.47 A careers adviser, for example, in a '1992 university' reported having to find external sponsorship to

fund important elements of her job which could no longer be funded out of the university's budget. One of the technical support staff described the way in which his department had to raise money from other sources in order to mitigate the impact of cuts in their budget:

> '[We]... set up a small shop that basically provides budget stationery for students on the campus... we make very little profit from that, but what we do make from it goes back into the maintenance for our equipment... and is added to what we receive from the university.'

4.48 Technical and computing support staff, in particular, found themselves under increasing pressure to raise money outside the higher education sector. They were expected to take on external 'consultancy' work to support their department. One explained:

> '[We] do external consultancy work for people outside the university... we've got several contracts like that, that are ongoing... what we started doing is actually taking that work on and using some of the finances to replace the timetable by [our] staff doing it, instead of buying extra staff.'

4.49 These developments fundamentally altered the context in which support staff worked, with consequent effects on the nature of their work. Many staff were uncomfortable with these developments. They perceived a preoccupation with cost-effectiveness and fund-raising to be incompatible with the aims and objectives of higher education.

The managerial culture

4.50 Many staff were not surprised that the new enterprise culture in higher education had brought with it a 'new breed' of managers. Indeed, they perceived this to be an important element of the 'commercial' environment.

4.51 They claimed that the people assigned to manage them often were inappropriate, usually because they were inexperienced in their area of work. Thus, computing staff in one university found themselves being managed by a Head Librarian after a merger. They were clearly uneasy about the implications of this new management structure.

4.52 Other staff accepted the need for a stronger management structure but felt that the role of the new managers had not been fully considered. A librarian commented:

> 'I think it's... about people using the right words. Because with universities, certainly traditionally, it was much more admin rather than management. Now you're getting people who are almost playing at being managers... so they pick up a clever management idea and [then] they drop it and do something else.'

4.53 A library systems assistant agreed, saying: *'Because I've so recently come out of the [private sector]... I hear the same words, but they're just not doing it, you know. They're playing at it, they don't know what they're doing'*. Staff had no choice but to adapt their working lives to this new management structure, but found it *'unpleasant'* and *'morale-sapping'*.

4.54 The issue of liaison between staff and managers was pertinent to all administrative and support staff. They frequently felt that they suffered as a result of a lack of consultation between administrative and support staff and their managers. Consequently, staff often reported that their working lives were made considerably harder because management decision-making was ill-informed and unrealistic.

4.55 Administrative and support staff widely agreed that they had had to develop methods of '*managing their managers*' to try and minimise the disruption caused by inappropriate management decisions. One course administrator said of the academics for whom she worked:

> '*Bad time-keepers, they don't do anything on time, they've no idea about money... You learn*

about fire-fighting, and pushing all the time. My job would be much easier if I wasn't always chasing academics.'

Responsibility without power

4.56 Clearly the role and profile of administrative and support functions in higher education has altered quite considerably over recent years. Many staff have found themselves taking on higher levels of responsibility and playing an increasingly central role in the delivery of higher education.

4.57 Very few of the staff were opposed to extending their skills or taking on new responsibilities. In fact, many welcomed the opportunity to increase their level of responsibility and gained satisfaction from a more varied workload. Yet many expressed very real concerns about some of the new responsibilities they had undertaken. Their concerns focused on three main areas:

- The new responsibilities were in addition to and not instead of their normal responsibilities. Consequently, they felt unable to spend enough time familiarising themselves with new tasks before becoming solely responsible for them. Moreover, they often felt they were forced into taking responsibility for these tasks because they were so worried about the implications of leaving them undone.
- There was rarely an explicit recognition that this transfer of responsibility had occurred. This was the source of greatest concern. Staff claimed that they were taking on new responsibilities without sufficient training or back-up. Several staff worried that there was no 'safety net' to pick up on any mistakes they made.

  '... If something goes wrong then, ultimately, I'm to blame. I don't necessarily want to be managed but I like to feel that there is somebody around who takes a share of the responsibility alongside me, because although I have the responsibility, I don't have the power.'

- This 'responsibility without power' was the element of their changed roles and responsibilities about which administrative and support staff expressed greatest concern.

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