

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Rise and Work of New Professionals in Higher Education

Jürgen Enders<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

**Abstract:**

The paper will discuss research on the emergence of a relatively new staff category in higher education that does no longer fit the traditional academic-administrative divide: new professionals who support processes in research, teaching, public engagement, and management. Focussing on the UK, their rise is tied to the overall rise of management in higher education and to changes in contexts and conditions for universities over recent decades. Based on conceptualisations of institutional work and qualitative interview data, the paper discusses their roles as hybrid professionals serving in a wide variety of specialised expert roles, their sources of professional legitimacy and power as well as their contestation. As situated professionals, this new staff group is not only embedded in but also dependent on local organisational orders that influence their professional boundary work with academics: reflecting rather traditional academic-administrative divides, third spaces of fluid collaborations, or managerialist disruptions of academic values and powers.

**Paper:**

International research on the rise and role of new professionals who work beyond the traditional academic-administrative divide and provide support in research and teaching as well as for strategic leadership and management began in the early 1990s but took off as a topic in the mid-2000s (see, for example, Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Larsen, 1998; Rhoades, 2010, 2016; Kottmann & Enders, 2013a, 2013b; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013; Whitchurch, 2008, 2012; Baltaru, 2019; Enders & Naidoo, 2019). This paper zooms into the context of British research universities and explores the role of professional actors who support teaching and learning. It draws on the concept of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Greenwood et al. 2011; Cai & Mehari 2015) looking at actors who mediate between the organisation and its environment, providing meaning to institutional pressures, theorising the success and failure of existing norms and practices. The empirical work incorporated interviews with 31 new professionals from three research universities gathering in-depth information and narratives from them (supplemented by six interviews with academic managers, document analyses, and field notes). In the following, two questions are explored: (1) What are the sources and contestations of legitimacy and power of the new professionals? (2) What is the influence of the specific organisational context on their institutional work?

(1) The study revealed that the sources of legitimacy and power of the new professionals were three-fold: External norms, rules, and resource dependencies were mobilised to represent the unavoidable need for organisational reactivity. Legitimacy and power were delegated to some of these

professionals by senior leadership to deal with environmental change and to reinforce intra-organisational coping. Intermediary field-level organisations, other universities and professional self-organisations were also utilised to provide expert templates for the new professionals to change institutional and organisational practices. Their institutional work mobilised a whole range of dimensions of agency: the reproduction of established practices and institutions, evaluative practices that enabled them to exercise expert judgement to accomplish goals, and institutional entrepreneurship that supported planning for change.

Their sources of legitimacy and power were, however, contested. Agendas and interests of relevant others who provide material and symbolic resources, such as leadership and management, were changing and could not be taken for granted. In addition, supporting and controlling teaching and learning in research universities was revealed as a source of inter-professional conflict with academics who wished to maintain the primacy of research as well as professional autonomy over their teaching. The institutional work of the new professionals can thus be seen to represent a challenge to the dominant position and the logic of the academic incumbents.

(2) Such patterns were, however, substantially mediated by variations in the structures, uses and practices of the new professionals within the three universities emerged. One case study university provided a scattered pattern of the new professionals being dispersed among numerous central and decentral administrative units. They found themselves seen solely as administrative staff, rather detached from the core of teaching and learning, and academics characterised as being in a very dominant position. Such local embeddedness reminds of institutionalist accounts of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) institutional work from the core technology.

A very different picture emerged from a university that had recruited new professionals with an academic background and set up a central hybrid academic-professional support unit. Many new professionals were active in academic and student services while being research active. Here, the emergency of a 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2012) could be most clearly identified, boundaries between academics and new professionals were blurring and new forms of project-based collaboration were emerging.

Such a rather harmonious picture was contrasted by a university that was in the middle of a wholesale organisational change process driven by managerial imperatives and the ambition to climb in rankings. Most new professionals had been hired from business or governmental intermediary organisations and were expected to actively feed into the leadership steer. This university most clearly reflected a disruptive account (Kehm, 2015) where the new professionals were aligned with the managerial change project while challenging the academic incumbents.

The new professionals can thus be characterised as situated professionals (Noordegraaf, 2007; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013) both in the sense of relying on organisational responses to external pressures for their professionalisation project, and in the sense of being situated within local orders (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Bleiklie, Enders & Lepori, 2015) that influence the spaces for and meanings of doing institutional work. The paper thus points at the possibility of institutional change being de-coupled, hybridised or sedimented depending on organisational setting.

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