

283 Doing the heavy lifting: The experiences of working class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities

Jess Pilgrim-Brown

University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

At present, research which seeks to understand social class based experiences of universities has focused predominantly on the experiences of working class academics and working class students. There is currently a large gap in research which has not yet addressed the experiences of working class professional services and administrative staff. In fact, professional services voices in themselves rarely feature in academic literature regardless of social class background. This paper outlines findings of an EdD thesis. Using semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry, the experiences of 13 working class professional services employees at Russell Group universities were collected. This paper both addresses the complexities of defining social class in the 21st century and looks at the experiences of those working in professional services. It hopes to contribute to knowledge by investigating the complexities of organizational culture through the experiences that professional services staff have working day to day in Russell Group universities.

Full paper

All participants reported generally good relationships with others in professional services teams and working class students who they sought to help. Where participants mentioned relationships with students from other social class backgrounds and academics, these relationships were reported with a distinctly negative framing. Working class professional services staff are subjected to poor behaviour, disdain, a lack of respect, with derogatory and demeaning action on the part of academics and students from other social class backgrounds.

The single most common theme when asked what the least enjoyable part of their role was, was unequivocally the relationships they had with academics. Participants referred to these behaviours as being a result of a higher degree of value placed on academics, a sense that academics were the ones who were 'shining', a lack of regard for professional services work and a sense that professional services staff could be used to carry out often demeaning and non-contracted work, even whilst ill or on leave. The mechanisms at play which demonstrate this lack of value include direct examples of poor behaviour towards professional services staff (shouting, speaking in a derogatory way), using deferential language, not valuing professional services voices in meetings and placing expectations on staff which were unreasonable or unfeasible. At times where professional services colleagues demonstrated historical instances of speaking up (which does not seem to be a normative course of behaviour for working class staff members), they were shushed or told to get on with their work, and therefore not taken seriously.

Not feeling fully included in the culture of the organisation in which they worked materialised in different ways across this study. For many of the participants in this study, they were highly qualified individuals, often with a PhD or Master's degree and yet they felt they were unable to progress in their careers due, either to a lack of qualification, or because the career path or trajectory had no further steps on it. In these instances, technical colleagues expressed their dissatisfaction that future promotion would have to come at the expense of people management, despite their functional roles in IT and programming. It was clear that where universities were making big decisions, such as relocating a campus, that they had not implemented a mainstreaming framework and therefore failed to take into consideration the impact these policies changes would have on people with different personal demographics.

A further facet of not being truly included in the fabric of the university was the sense that there was a predominant set of cultural tastes and preferences which were exemplified and demonstrated by those who had come from different social class backgrounds. Many spoke about their inability to engage in conversations about art, theatre,

opera or 'high culture', a lack of understanding about classical antiquity, or an inability to fit in with the style of dress which seemed to pervade the workplace. Despite feeling a tension of not fitting into their workplace environment, colleagues noted that this shift in working life and (sometimes) geographical relocation also made it very difficult to fit into their previous home environment, rendering them often as feeling like 'class traitors' to their roots, yet also not being able to fully integrate into their new local environment.

Finally, this study illuminates themes around class which ask larger conceptual questions about the social mobility agenda which is currently being pursued across the board by large governmental organisations. As this study shows there are two fundamental issues with this approach. Firstly, there is the concern that whilst individuals might be able to access an institution or organisation that actually, they never fully 'integrate' and always feel a sense of flux between their origins and the new environment they find themselves in at work. This raises significant questions about well-being. Furthermore, the idea of social mobility and the integration of people from working class backgrounds is predicated on the prioritisation of the kind of cultural tastes and behaviours which are already in practice within that institution. In the case of large city-based firms and organisations and in 'elite' universities, this set of cultural tastes and behaviours have been set in place by decades, and sometimes, centuries, of this space being dominated by members of the upper and upper middle classes. As such, this kind of approach advocates for the adoption of these kinds of cultural tastes and dispositions in opposition to the cultures and tastes of the working class (Walkerdine 2021).

References

- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2004). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Crew, T. (2020). *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-58352-1>
- Crew, T. (2020). *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics: Precarity and Diversity in Academia*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crew, T. (2021). Navigating Academia as a Working-Class Academic. *Journal of Working-Class Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.13001/jwcs.v6i2.6833>
- Crozier, G., & Reay, D. (2011). Capital Accumulation: Working-Class Students Learning How to Learn in HE. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(2), 145–155.
- Ingram, N., & Bradley, H. (2012). Banking on the Future: choices, aspirations and economic hardship in working-class student experience. In *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain Power, Difference and Suffering*. Springer.
- Johansson, M., & Jones, S. (2019). Interlopers in class: A duoethnography of working-class women academics. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(11), 1527–1545. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12398>