

What is a professional services researcher in UK higher education?

Charlotte Verney, Helen Curtis
University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Within UK higher education many staff are employed on a professional services contract, as opposed to an academic contract, to fulfil a range of functions. Professional services staff are not typically required, or expected, to conduct or engage with research, but many do. Their engagement with research is not visible in the research literature or practice, and the concept of a 'professional services researcher' not well understood.

In this paper we share insights from research within one UK higher education institution that sought to understand the experiences of professional services staff who use research approaches in their work and how they can engage with the research infrastructure within their institution. Based on this research, we share an emerging conceptual framework to situate the acts of being a professional services researcher in higher education.

Full paper

Introduction

Within UK higher education many staff are employed on professional services contracts fulfilling a range of functions, including: globally recognised professional functions such as human resources, finance, IT; tailored service functions within the sector, such as research support, teaching administration, student services; and often functions that blend academic and professional competencies such as educational developers, learning technologists, technicians. This paper explores the experiences of individuals employed on professional services contracts who conduct research, and the support available to them from University services.

This paper draws on findings reported in Verney & Curtis (forthcoming), which is one of the first published articles that has focused on higher education professional services staff conducting research. It contributes to wider debates about the roles of professional services staff in higher education, particularly building on arguments that such staff often have a skill set that blends research and administration (Whitchurch, 2008), play an

important role in knowledge and infrastructure development (De Jong, 2023; De Jong and Del Junco, 2023), and make contributions to their institution which are not always visible (Szekeres, 2004; Vere, Verney & Webster-Deakin, 2024), which can lead to feelings of exclusion and othering (Allen-Collinson, 2006; Caldwell, 2022).

Approach

The research was exploratory in nature and funded through a sector-wide Research England initiative intended to enhance research culture. It arose from the experiences of the authors, who experienced challenges when navigating the research process whilst employed on a professional services contract. Following ethical approval, it generated data through 13 semi-structured interviews with 18 experts about different stages of the research process at the University, and through an online questionnaire targeted at professional services staff. The online questionnaire invited respondents who self-identified as using research approaches in their work, and generated 22 responses. Data from both sources was analysed thematically.

Findings

Professional services staff using research approaches in their work were:

- Highly educated: all held an undergraduate degree, 12 held postgraduate degrees, and 6 held doctorates.
- Sometimes experienced in research from previous roles: a small number had held positions as research assistants, lead researchers, independent research, or employed in a researched facility.
- Often using research approaches to inform higher education practice: in areas that covered: equality, diversity, and inclusion; library services; public engagement; museums & archives; market research; student wellbeing; student experience; user research; learning, teaching & assessment; management and administration; belonging, community, connection; digital content; digital education; inclusive recruitment; impact evaluations.
- Often focused on delivering impact to practice: through informing university decisions; increase visibility of issues; promoting best practice informing guidance creation; recommendations to change practice; recommendations to change policy; creating sector-wide networks; community building; consistent user experience; supporting understanding of pedagogic literature for those new to a discipline; helping to deliver user-led approaches; informing student-led learning in pedagogic practice; creating a new evidence base (for institution and sector); informing pilot interventions.

The concept of professional services staff using research approaches, either to conduct a full-scale research project, or to inform their practice, was not well understood within the

University. As such, professional services staff found it difficult to navigate the research process. In particular, they perceived:

- Disparity in esteem associated with their research compared to academic researchers;
- Lack of visibility and clarity over access to training and support;
- Difficulties navigating the research ethics process;
- Supportive line managers, but a lack of research-specific mentoring.

Discussion & Conclusion – An emerging framework

This research was based within one higher education institution. The questionnaire relied on cascade methods of distribution, which are unreliable within a large and complex organisation, and therefore, the 22 responses should be conceived as more akin to a convenience sample. Whilst only a small number of responses, coupled with the insights from the key informant interviews, the research has provided new insights into the ways that professional services staff are using research approaches in their work, and the experiences of those attempting this. Furthermore, it has highlighted the absence of a conceptual understanding of professional services staff as researchers. As such, we have begun to develop a conceptual framework to illustrate the ways that professional services researchers may engage with research activities, and to illustrate how this may overlap with, or be separate to the role that professional services have in supporting and enabling the research of others (see Figure 1). We believe this framework could be developed with further research, and has the potential to help shape research support and culture within institutions to be more inclusive for professional services staff engaged in research.

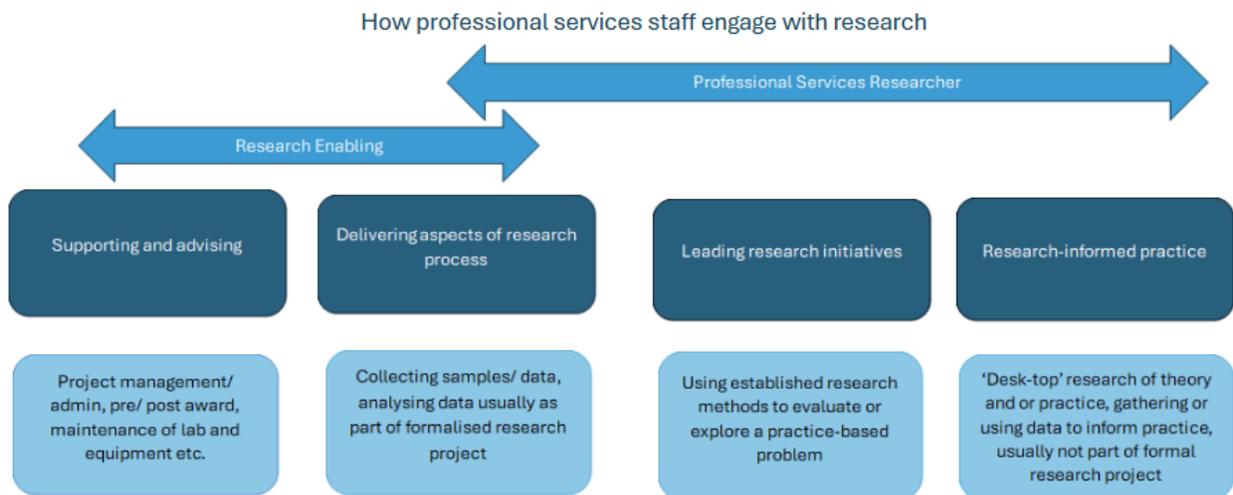


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for how professional services engage with research