Neither Academic nor 'Non-Academic': The Nomenclature Preferences of University Research Support Staff. (0295)

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Background

In its journey for recognition (Dobson & Conway, 2003; McInnis, 1998; Szekeres, 2004) and professional status (Conway, 1998, 2002, 2003; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Jones, 1989; Joyce, 1980; Topley, 1990; Whitchurch, 2006a, 2006b), university administration has yet to establish for itself a form of nomenclature that distinguishes it as a group in a positive and affirming way. According to Caplow (1954, as cited in Joyce, 1980) the determination of a name for an occupation is one of a series of necessary steps in the process of the occupation's 'professionalisation' or development as a profession. The name must be distinct from other occupations, "...providing a title which can be monopolized..." (p. 9). The determination of such a title for university administrative staff has been a lengthy, challenging and ongoing process that is yet to be resolved (Dobson & Conway, 2003). Currently this group is predominantly known in the higher education lexicon, literature and policy documentation as 'Non-Academic' or 'Other', both are terms which have been described as 'negative classification' or 'negative marking' (Allen-Collinson, 2010), in that they define the group by what they are not (ie. 'non-academic') rather than by what they are or do (Pickersgill, Barneveld, & Bearfield, 1998).

Research Study

It is against this backdrop that an inquiry was undertaken into the nomenclature preferences of university research support staff, a subgroup of university administration. This constitutes a strand in a doctoral research study about the profile and contribution of staff located within research services units of Australian universities (Sebalj & Holbrook, 2006, 2009). This study was directed to all research services staff, centrally located within 36 participating universities, with functions in areas such as research grants,

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higher degree research student administration, ethics and safety clearance, research committees, information systems and research policy development and implementation. The findings on nomenclature preferences are drawn from the questionnaire responses of 194 university research managers and administrators (RMA), ranging from the most junior to the most senior. It is argued that this research has relevance for the overarching university administration group.

Nomenclature Preferences

Participants were asked their most and least preferred nomenclature preferences from six response category options, namely: 'Administrative Staff'; 'General Staff'; 'Manager'; 'University Administrator'; 'Non-Academic Staff' and 'Other'. The responses reflect the complexities surrounding naming and identity. Participants indicated that they want to be known by terminology that is relevant and positive, providing clarity on the roles and responsibility levels undertaken and the need for workplace recognition and respect. When providing alternative nomenclature a number of participants referred to the term 'Professional staff'. The emerging use of this term in Australian universities (noting its established use in the UK HE sector (HEFCE, 2010)) underscores the growing aspirational and professional needs of this occupational group with reference to increasing academic capital and rising performance expectations and accountabilities.

The title of 'University Administrator' emerged as the most preferred title whilst the titles of 'General Staff' and 'Non-Academic Staff' were the least preferred. 'Administrative Staff' was a problematic form of nomenclature as on the one hand it was seen as a title which aptly described the work being undertaken – particularly by participants on the lower salary levels. Whilst for others it was seen as demeaning terminology which did not adequately describe the breadth and depth of work roles or accountabilities nor the critical thinking and analysis performed by participants on higher salary levels in particular. 'Manager' was only seen as appropriate for the more senior levels with managerial responsibilities.

The term of 'General staff' (used in Australian universities as a catchall to describe all university staff who are not Academics) was seen as derogatory to the role undertaken with the primary complaint being the term itself was too broad, encompassing as it did a wide range of positions and thus ignoring specialisations. For some this term was outdated terminology. In turn 'Non-Academic Staff' was predominantly seen as divisive and negative, indicating that academic staff were primary and all else were 'other' or of lesser importance. This finding is similar to that of Allen-Collinson's in her study of UK university research administrators (2006; 2007). Whilst the term of 'Non-Academic' undoubtedly has its uses as a descriptor or catchall category within the HE sector, it continues the "us and them" mentality and downplays the contribution of staff who are not employed as academic staff. It also does not recognise the increasing credentialism of such staff.

Nomenclature forms of Administrator/Administrative carry a baggage that is experienced more acutely by some more than others, whilst the term of Manager clearly cannot cover all salary/responsibility levels. Consequently, it would seem that a graded system of titles stratified by levels of responsibility/salary levels is appropriate. Such a system would seem appropriate to address career/status development or aspirational needs, whilst recognising the differing levels of operation and accountabilities of incumbents. The academic nomenclature of Associate Lecturer, Lecturer and so on provides an apt example of a 'nomenclature ladder'. The emerging term of 'Professional staff' across the sector will not provide differentiation across occupational sub-groups nor will it provide the recommended nomenclature ladder.

Devising a form of nomenclature that acts as suitable terminology for a diverse group of university staff who are not employed as academics is a complex challenge. Competing interests and opposing viewpoints complicate the issue, as do the respondents' multilayered expectations of the purpose and function of nomenclature itself. Such expectations expressed in this research include that nomenclature must deliver respect and recognition from stakeholders to the title holder. It ought to aptly describe the work being undertaken as well as being understood by others. Workplace cultural issues are

implicated as is the changing nature of the occupational and professional identities of university RMA. Despite such complexity, what is most clear in this area of inquiry is that consideration should be given to the removal of the nomenclature of "Non-Academic" from the lexicon of the Higher Education Sector in literature, policy documentation and in practice and that more appropriate, positive and affirming terminology be used in its place.

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