

Carroll Graham<sup>1</sup>, JulieAnne Regan<sup>2</sup>, Nicola Banks<sup>2</sup>, Emma Dollard<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, <sup>2</sup>University of Chester, UK

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# A Tale of Two Cities: the contribution of Professional staff to the student experience (0011)

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## Background and rationale

With the global emphasis on student satisfaction in higher education, and increased shifting of costs to students (Jones 2010), the student experience, culminating in positive student outcomes, has become a significant driver for the work of all staff in higher education. Although, in the last decade, there has been growing discourse by professional staff<sup>1</sup> themselves about their professional practices and their identities (for example: Conway 2000, Szekeres 2006, Graham 2009, Szekeres 2011), there remains little research into the contributions that professional staff make to student outcomes (Graham 2013).

This paper reports on a comparative study of the work of professional staff, between an Australian and a UK university, in terms of how staff perceive they contribute to student outcomes. Taking the approach of asking professional staff about their work, these comparative studies used outcomes, derived in a meta-study, which reviewed 146 international studies (Prebble et al. 2004). This meta-study developed 13 propositions for student support (referred to as *Prebble Propositions (PP)* in this paper), which enhance student outcomes in terms of retention, persistence and achievement (Prebble 2004). Following the first round it became apparent that three of the propositions were not deemed, by panelists, to be relevant to professional staff and were excluded in subsequent rounds.

## Methodology

The Australian study, conducted in 2009, (Graham 2010) developed a methodology that adapted the Schmidt Delphi Method (Schmidt 1997, Schmidt et al. 2001) for ranking the Prebble Propositions, which was replicated in a UK, post-92 institution in 2012. The Schmidt Delphi method for ranking items involves three phases: a brainstorming phase to develop a list of issues; a narrowing down phase to pare the list of issues; and a ranking phase to order the remaining items (Schmidt et al. 2001). For the purposes of this study, the meta-study by Prebble et al. (2004) and the associated development of the propositions were considered to be the first two phases.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is used, in the institution being studied, to cover a range of non-academic roles within HE. Other terms in use are: General staff, Professional Staff, Administrative staff, Associate staff and Non-Academic staff. Finding one term to encompass the wide range of non-academic roles in HE appears to be problematic as the range is so broad (Sebalj, Holbrook and Bourke 2012).

### ***The Delphi method***

Essentially, the Delphi method is a series of questionnaire rounds, interspersed with controlled feedback to the participants, based on the results of the previous round. The purpose of this method is to create group consensus from individual opinions (Hasson, Keeney and McKenna 2000). The Delphi method does not require the experts to meet physically, thereby reducing the logistical constraints of the study.

### ***Composition of the panels***

Choosing appropriate experts is an important aspect of Delphi studies (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004), of which there are two key features: panel size and the knowledge of panellists (Powell 2003). Delphi study expert panellists should meet four overarching criteria: (1) knowledge and experience of the issues under study; (2) the capacity and willingness to contribute to the investigation; (3) sufficient time for the study; and (4) adequate communication skills (Ziglio 1996). Nevertheless, the number of expert participants required for a panel is not large, with 10–18 being considered suitable (Paliwoda 1983, Ziglio 1996). In the Australian institution, 26 faculty-based panellists agreed to participate. In the UK institution two panels were formed, to facilitate an internal comparison between faculty-based and non-faculty-based staff, as well as an external comparison to the Australian institution. Twenty faculty-based panellists and 28 non-faculty-based panellists agreed to participate.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Three questionnaire rounds were used in this study, which is consistent with attainment of consensus, balanced against panellist fatigue (Powell 2003). The data was collected manually in the Australian institution and via an online survey tool in the UK institution. Panellists were asked to rank the PPs according to the level of contribution made by professional staff. That is, rank 1 is the proposition to which professional staff contribute most, and rank 10 the least.

Analysis of the panellists' responses was undertaken after each round, and provided as feedback to the panellists for the subsequent round. This feedback included the mean rank of each proposition, the percentage of panellists ranking each proposition in the top half of the rankings, and the level of agreement of the panel as indicated by Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) (Kendall and Gibbons 1990). The response rate remained high in the Australian institution, whereas there was a significant drop off in the UK institution. The reasons for this and the impact on the findings will be discussed in the presentation.

### ***Results and initial comparative analysis***

The results for Kendall's coefficient of concordance, in the Australian institution, showed increasing agreement over the three rounds, with agreement by Round 3 being "moderate" In the UK institution the level of agreement remained only "weak" for both panels. Whereas a pattern of increasing agreement was evident in the non-faculty-based panel, agreement weakened in the faculty-based group. The most highly ranked proposition in both institutions was that "Institutional behaviours, environments and processes are welcoming and efficient" (PP1) — that is, students' enquiries are dealt with promptly, knowledgeably and with a friendly manner. This indicates that professional staff, from both institutions, consider this to be their main contribution to students' experience and outcome.

Initial analysis indicates that although there were similarities across all three panels, there were three propositions for which the ranking is noticeably different. The contribution to counselling and pre-enrolment advice (PP3) was deemed greater in the Australian institution than that of the UK. However, the contribution to ensuring an absence of discrimination (PP11) and creating a culture which welcomes and adapts to diversity (PP13) was considered to be greater by the UK panels.

Following further comparative analysis during the summer of 2013, this conference paper will

report on these results more fully and discuss implications, for institutions, relating to support and development of this important staff group.

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