

**PARTNERS NOT COMPETITORS: THE DEVELOPING ROLE OF THE
SENIOR ADMINISTRATOR IN ACADEMIC UNITS IN UK UNIVERSITIES
IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY**

by

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ABSTRACT

It has been a widely held belief that the role of senior administrators in academic units in UK universities is ill-defined and sometimes perceived to be in conflict with that of their academic colleagues. This research was initiated with the aim of contributing to the improvement of working relationships between senior administrators and their academic colleagues through increasing our knowledge of how the roles are defined, their assigned responsibilities and the perceptions held of the post holders. Using a case-study methodology, two studies were undertaken at different institutions to investigate these concepts.

Recommendations are made to institutional senior managers, heads of academic units, post holders and the relevant professional body (the Association of University Administrators) that encompass proposed improvements to:

- administrative structures and human resource strategies;
- professional development programmes for all staff;
- induction, probation, appraisal and review processes.

It is further proposed that senior administrators be integrated into the senior management team and hold line management responsibility for the administrative team within the academic unit. Of utmost importance is the proactive dissemination and communication of the responsibilities assigned to the role if more effective working relationships are to be achieved between the senior administrator and academic colleagues.

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INTRODUCTION

This investigation sets out to develop further the general understanding of the role of senior administrators in academic units in UK universities. In undertaking this research I am seeking to provide information that could inform practitioners aspiring to such roles, managers of post holders, and bodies responsible for the professional development of administrative staff. The aims are to build upon existing published research that demonstrates that there is a general lack of clarity and understanding regarding this role, and also to expand the level of knowledge available and identify areas for further research in the future. In addition to the views stated in the literature, personal experiences of working as an administrator in higher education have shown that there is a general lack of understanding within institutions regarding the purpose of the senior administrator roles in academic units and the nature of their responsibilities and contribution to the work of the unit. This has on occasion resulted in tensions between academic staff, management and other administrators. Consequently, in addition to the aim of building upon existing published literature, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the ongoing demystification of the role, its purpose and responsibilities, and go some way to demonstrating that the senior administrator is a partner with other colleagues in the academic unit and not just a competitor for power and resources.

The focus of this research is senior administrators based in academic units in UK universities during the years 2005 to 2006. The overriding central research question

comprises three parts:

- how did the roles come about;
- what are the post holders' duties and responsibilities;
- and how is the role perceived?

This thesis is structured under a number of headings that broadly follow the process of identifying the literature to inform the nature and design of the enquiry, the design and management of the research itself, the presentation of the data obtained, consideration of the findings, the conclusions drawn, areas for further research and reflections on the outcomes from some stakeholders.

In this chapter a summary of the main aims in undertaking this research is given, considering exactly what was to be discovered about senior administrators, the initial ideas on which research design is based and an outline of the methodological issues and processes used to obtain, analyse and consider data relating to this. There is a brief justification for selecting this area for research in the first place and how my own beliefs and professional circumstances may impact on the research design, implementation and findings.

Aims of the research

In order to establish how these roles are defined, by whom and what process, and how important their responsibilities are within the work of the academic unit, it is first necessary to effectively identify the overall aim (outlined above) to focus the enquiry (Wallace and Poulson, 2003). This gives rise to a number of questions that are further influenced by publications outlining the role of the head of academic unit in

universities (Hare and Hare, 2002; Smith, 2002) which indicate that the role has expanded so much in recent years as a result of devolution of administrative responsibility from the institutional centres, that there is a need for additional administrative support at a senior level in order to manage a successful academic unit, implying a direct involvement in undertaking those responsibilities (Dobson and Conway, 2003) and the development of closer working relationships between administrators and academics (Seyd, 2000; Duke, 2002). It has also been widely acknowledged (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; HEFCE, 2006) that there are now more administrators than at any time before in universities although there is very little research into why and how the roles have developed (Delamont, 1996; Whitchurch, 2004) although some attempt has occasionally been made to describe their responsibilities and activities (Hare and Hare, 2002; Szekeres, 2004; Szekeres, 2006) and what perceptions are held of the roles as there has been blurring between traditional academic and administrative areas (McInnis, 1998; Bassnett, 2005).

The key research questions based on this literature and the research aims are:

- How is the role of the academic unit senior administrator defined?
 - What are their responsibilities?
 - By what process and by whom have those responsibilities been identified?
- How is the role perceived?
- How important is the role considered to be in relation to the core business (teaching and research) of the academic unit?

These research questions are not intended to confine the investigation, rather to define it and enable a range of answers to be forthcoming from the data collected. It is possible that respondents from different positions within the university hierarchy may

hold different perceptions that in turn impact on the way in which the role is perceived and/or expected to be involved with the overall work of the academic unit. There may also be implications for role development and support where differing perceptions exist within the organisation, giving rise to the potential for misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the role and its responsibilities.

The theoretical aim is to discover what influences are brought to bear on the role through its creation and development, and perceptions held of it. It is my belief that this role is seen by many as being key to the work of the unit, and it is certain that this is the underpinning belief held by the relevant professional body, the Association of University Administrators (AUA, 2004).

In order to obtain data for this investigation a series of interviews with a sample of senior administrators, heads of academic units and institutional senior managers were undertaken at one university as a case study (Denscome, 2003). This provides an insight into the perceptions held by three levels of university leadership and enables the identification of areas of similarity, difference and tension. This is supported by a second case study of an institution where a new senior administrator role was created and to which I was appointed during the research period. The reasons for selecting this case study approach are presented in detail later in the thesis, along with consideration of alternative methods and their merits and problems within this investigation.

The next section of this chapter considers the justification for and context of this research.

Justification for and context of the research

It is widely acknowledged that there has been a significant devolution of administrative responsibility to the academic units of the university from the centre in recent years; whilst most funding is still controlled centrally by government and the institution is responsible for reporting consolidated student numbers and financial returns to the funding bodies. At the same time there has been an expansion in the numbers of support, general or non-academic staff working in academic units. How far this is in response to government requirements for quality control and academic accountability, and how far it is due to the changing nature of the core business of the university and basic unit is unclear.

Academic staff and the academic research, teaching and scholarship they undertake are quite properly the prime focus in universities. However, in the modern university, these functions could not be carried out without the input of general (... “non-academic”) staff. (Dobson and Conway, 2003, p123)

Furthermore, this devolution and growth in the numbers of administrative posts at academic unit level is seen by some to be causing tensions between the academic staff whose view of the university is associated with a collegial method of working and the new administrators who are responsible for monitoring progress, quality, budgets, and learning and teaching resources are associated with a more hierarchical, managerial method of working. It may be that the academic staff considers the administrators to be encroaching on territory about which they have little knowledge and no experience, whilst actually executing quite high levels of accountability, power and control over resources and evaluation. Equally, the administrators may feel that the academic staff do not recognise that the nature of the business of higher education has changed and that the institutions need specialists in administration just as much as they need subject specialists in teaching and research.

General staff are not there to be resented – they’re not competitors, they are actually partners. (Dobson and Conway, 2003, p124)

This research proposes to build on the work of Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) as well as others including Dobson and Conway (2003). Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) undertook an empirical study into the growth of university administration in Norway in the 1980s and 1990s. They comment that the role titles and responsibilities described are unique to Norway; however, they draw a number of comparisons with other nations and draw on worldwide literary sources.

Yet, the accounts of how these administrators interpret and present their own position within the university system represent fascinating stories of a group of university personnel that work under conditions of crosscutting pressures of professional pride, struggle for recognition, humbleness and loyalty to the organisation they have committed themselves to. (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004, p465)

Taking this into consideration, my investigation is designed to undertake what I believe to be a unique study in the UK based on different data sources and methods to broaden the understanding of the nature of the specific role of academic unit senior administrator in the UK.

Dobson and Conway (2003) comment that there has been little research in the area of the ‘administrative occupation’ (p125) and note that they feel that this is because there is no general understanding held by others regarding the purpose of the role:

... largely because there is little recognition beyond administrators themselves that a definable occupational grouping exists. The existence of administrators with qualifications equal to those of a university’s professors is a new phenomenon, and not all of these “super administrators” are simply academics who have transferred from academe. These days, administrators even enrol for PhDs, speak at conferences and publish papers in scholarly, refereed journals. (p125)

For administrators to be able to formally claim their position in the division of labour in universities, they will need to clarify the knowledge base, skills and expertise they bring to university management and, perhaps most importantly,

to define how their work contributes to the teaching and research that is the core business of universities. (p131)

These thoughts have led to the desire to discover some of the perceptions held by institutional senior managers and the heads of the academic units in which the post holders work. Dobson and Conway's (2003) view that only the post holders see themselves as having a distinct role is interesting, and one that does not appear to be supported by the AUA (2004) and some other writers. Hare and Hare (2002) and Bassnett (2005) both feel that university administrators have taken on new and clearly defined responsibilities as a result of the changing nature of the higher education sector as well as those that have traditionally been the responsibility of academic staff. Bassnett (2005) comments that there has in some cases been a conscious:

... strategy to employ administrators with academic credentials on a par with those of academics. It was felt that in this way there would be a mutual respect and possibly even some kind of exchange. (p99)

So this study endeavours to contribute to this discussion and knowledge base, with a view to informing institutional planning for professional administrative services and providing associated professional development support for staff. In addition to this, it is hoped that the findings may inform the continued development of the professional qualification offered by the Association of University Administrators and may also support new and aspiring academic unit senior administrators.

Statement of value position

The personal and professional values that I bring to this research are largely responsible for identifying the theme of my inquiry in the first place. As a university administrator for over 10 years, I am keen to develop and improve my professional practice and understanding of the environment in which I work. This is one of the main tenets of the AUA Code of Professional Standards (AUA, 1999) and as a

longstanding member of this organisation this has influenced my work and study throughout my career. I am a strong believer in the importance of professional administrators in higher education, particularly at academic unit level.

My own experience of perceptions held of senior administrators has been one of mixed responses from colleagues from all areas and levels of the three institutions in which I have worked. These have ranged from respect and admiration for the administrators' contribution to the overall business objectives, through to suspicion and contempt for appearing to be intruding on aspects of university work that were historically the preserve of academic staff. Observing such perceptions in the workplace encouraged me to want to investigate this from a more objective perspective through a small-scale research project. Whilst recognising that I needed to acknowledge my own experiences, I believe that my understanding of the language and culture of this area of work gives me a unique insight and ability to understand the data obtained (Denscombe, 2003). However, I am fully aware of the potential to focus questions and analyse activities in such a way as to support my own views rather than trying to establish other views. Consequently I have implemented a number of measures during the design and implementation of the project that endeavour to curtail researcher bias as far as possible in order to discover other views, whilst using my understanding and knowledge of university administration to aid interpretation of the findings and these are addressed fully in the Research Design chapter.

Statement of broad issues linked to aims

The issues considered when designing this research included practical and ethical issues (Cohen et al, 2003) relating to access to respondents, ethical concerns regarding

the analysis and reporting of the data obtained, practical issues of time to collect, analyse and report the data within a suitable timescale for thesis submission, and the usefulness of the study to my own professional development and that of other administrators. Each of these was addressed during the design and management of the project and details of this consideration are given in later chapters.

Research process issues

The overriding issue was that the investigation would be feasible taking into account the time needed for data gathering and analysis, the resources available, and the timescale required for submission for assessment at the end of the recommended four year period of study. Consequently, it was necessary to design a project that would provide good data in a reasonable quantity to make the analysis and findings meaningful within the context of the overall aims.

One of the key aims for undertaking this research was to develop further an understanding of the senior administrator role in academic units. At the time of commencing my doctoral studies I was aspiring to such a role and felt that my research would inform my career development into a post of this type. I had three employment changes during the four years of the programme, including a period as a senior manager in an inner city secondary school, with the final change, at the beginning of the fourth year, being to take up a newly created post as the senior administrator in an academic unit of a university where I had not worked previously.

Fortunately this change happened at a time when the first case study interviews had been completed, thus providing an opportunity to review the research design to

incorporate my own professional experiences of setting up a newly created role of senior administrator and to undertake an evaluation of my experiences against those discovered in the first case study and the impressions gained during the review of the literature. Having discussed this approach with my supervisor and also my new line manager, and after addressing issues of confidentiality and data sensitivity, I received agreement from both to take this course of action. In view of my aim to use this research to inform aspiring senior administrators, I felt that it was particularly useful to be able to consider some of the issues encountered personally whilst developing this role myself. Furthermore, by contrasting the findings from this second case study with those from the first case study, it should be possible to identify some similarities and differences in processes and responsibilities that could contribute to the continuing professional and intellectual discussions regarding the nature of the senior administrator role.

Participant issues

The main issues relating to this were concerned with how the respondents interpreted the role under investigation, the meanings of words used in the research questions, and ethical considerations regarding access, anonymity and data usage.

Consequently a working definition of this role and its context was developed to clarify the position for the respondents. This described it as being the most senior administrative role working in support of an academic unit who did not undertake teaching or specialist academic research as part of the contract of employment, and was not the head of that unit. There was also the expectation that the post holder would report to the head of that academic unit and may have line management responsibility for one or more administrative or clerical colleagues in that unit. The

basic unit may be a School or a Faculty, but necessarily would have an academic remit and not be a central support academic unit such as Estates or Personnel, or be a research centre.

It was also important to ensure confidentiality and anonymity to all respondents and the institutions involved. A number of expressions of concern at the case study institution and my own employing university were raised relating to potentially sensitive contexts or comments; however, it was possible to allay these fears by assuring that no references to names or genders relating to specific posts would be made and any institutional references would be made in such a way that would not make identification by the reader easy.

The nature of the research to collect information relating to processes and perceptions did not suggest that the respondents were likely to suffer any damage by agreeing to participate and they were happy to continue on an informed basis having provided full agreement in writing and again verbally before the start of each interview.

Research design

Having defined the main aims of the enquiry and the issues linked to them, it was necessary to identify an appropriate method of investigation that would enable the collection of data that would address the main research questions. A number of options were considered including surveys, life-stories and case studies and the advantages and disadvantages of these will be addressed in the Research Design chapter.

After due deliberation, a case study methodology (Denscombe, 2003) was chosen for this investigation as it would allow consideration of different perceptions of the senior administrator's role from the three levels that had been identified as being of interest. Furthermore, this approach also supported the investigation of my own role using a documentary analysis approach including maintaining a research diary. The main institutional case study methodology was supported by employing a semi-structured interview method to focus the conversations clearly. This then required identification of an appropriate institution in which to carry out the interviews that was reasonably easy to travel to and to which access could be obtained. At the time of undertaking the interviews I was not working in a university so this gave different opportunities to select the location of my research rather than just using immediate colleagues.

In order to provide further information regarding the nature of the role under investigation, another source of data regarding perceptions held of the role and how it had been developed elsewhere was sought. Initially it had been decided to distribute a questionnaire survey to members of the Association of University Administrators' Departmental Administrators special interest group. However, during the period of undertaking the interviews I returned to working in a university (a different one from that used for the case study) and then a while later was successful in being offered a senior administrator post in yet another university in the region. As this was a newly created post and part of the remit was to establish the post within the unit, it was recognised as being an excellent opportunity to consider the findings of the first case study alongside a second where a new role was being implemented. Consequently the initial survey was abandoned in favour of a second case study based on documentary evidence and a research diary.

Summary of the research

This research has the main aim of discovering more about why and how the role of senior administrator in academic units in UK universities has developed and what its responsibilities are. It builds upon work that has considered the changing nature of university administration and the ever increasing workload of heads of academic units that have required additional administrative support.

Through considering a number of issues connected with undertaking research of this nature a case study approach was selected that would enable the obtaining of rich data that focussed clearly on the research questions.

This is a small scale research project that has been designed to contribute to the growing understanding of the role of senior administrator, to meet the assessment requirements of a Doctor of Education programme of study and also to support my personal professional development. It is of necessity very focussed in its content and outcomes; however, possibilities for further research are discussed later in this thesis.

The next chapter focuses on the literature reviewed to support the research aims and considers this under the main themes of organisational structure and academic units, university administration, role definition and responsibilities, and perceptions of the role of senior administrator. The literature pertaining to research design and methods is considered in the Research Design chapter. The chapter concludes with a discussion surrounding the link developing between the final research questions and the conceptual frameworks that had emerged and been developed from my literature review.

In the third chapter, Research Design, the reasons for selecting the methodology and methods employed to undertake the research are given, considering also what methods were described in the literature underpinning this investigation and how that influenced these decisions.

The findings from both case-studies are presented in the fourth chapter in the context of the three conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature review, reflecting on the effectiveness of the data collection methods chosen. These findings are analysed in sequence with the findings, considering each framework in turn and comparing the two case-studies with each other.

The final chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the research, re-presenting each framework in light of the analyses of the findings and demonstrating how far this research has supported or challenged the views expressed in the literature on which this research is designed to build. There is consideration of how far the thesis title “Partners not competitors: the development of the role of the senior administrator as an integral part of the work of academic units in UK universities in the 21st century” has been supported by this research. Recommendations for improving practice and potential user feedback bring the findings and analyses together in a practical application in the context of the aims of the research. Just as this research work has been designed to develop the ideas of others researching this topic, a number of potential future research areas have come to light during this research, and the chapter concludes with an outline of potential areas for further work in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter summarises a range of the current literature relating to the broad aims of the research and research questions (Hart, 2003). The process used to undertake a review of the literature that both underpins and develops the questions being asked is outlined, consideration is given to the key texts supporting the research for each of the main research questions, and the nature of the impact of the conclusions drawn from the review on the final research questions is described.

Supporting the broad aim of this research, Whitchurch (2004) identifies the lack of role clarity of administrative posts in higher education:

... the academic literature does not offer clarity on the subject of administrative roles and identities ... (p283).

This is echoed by a number of authors on the subject (McInnis, 1998; Dobson and Conway, 2003; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004) who also support the view that an investigation into a specific group of administrators would build on current understanding and add to the growing knowledge base of university administration, its roles and perceptions of those roles.

Further support for undertaking this research is provided by Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) who consider their research into the restructuring of the university administrative workforce to be a starting point for further investigation into such roles:

... apart from studies that address cost effectiveness in higher education institutions there is little research done on administrative personnel in its 'own right' ... [this study] attempts to contribute to the emerging scholarly interest in [administration] ... (p455)

Having worked as an academic unit administrator in a number of university central and academic units during the past 10 years, I was intrigued to find out whether my experiences of my own role definition were similar to other administrators. In order to do this a definition was needed for the group of administrators that would form the focus of the research. Becher and Kogan (1992) offer a definition of 'base units' in universities that are the:

... smallest component elements which have a corporate life of their own. Their identifying characteristics would normally include an administrative existence (designated head or chairman, a separately accounted budget); a physical existence (an identifiable set of premises); and an academic existence (a range of undergraduate training programmes), usually some provision for postgraduate work and sometimes a collective research activity. (p87)

However, having worked in such units for many years, I realised that there would also be a need for me to "make the familiar strange" (Delamont, 1996, p147) so that I could investigate an area with some detachment without taking "too many features ... for granted" (p146) whilst recognising the value of my experiences within it. This issue is addressed further in the Research Design chapter where I consider my own role within the research and the strengths and weaknesses of my involvement in the investigation. Delamont (1996) raises some interesting ideas regarding areas that have been under-researched in higher education; however, my own review of the literature could call into question some of the claims that no research exists into higher education occupations other than lecturing. Nevertheless, I do believe that it is largely true that research into the "unusual occupations" (p151) is sparse and if undertaken would certainly broaden our understanding of how to handle and develop

professional relationships between academic and other university staff. As Delamont concludes:

... the multiple and contested realities of the occupation culture(s) of higher education need to be treated as problematic by researchers, who need to deploy a range of techniques to *develop* 'strangeness' in their investigations. (p156)

There is evidence that the administration of academic units is a growing occupational area following the trend over the last 10 to 15 years towards devolved management and budgetary control to basic unit (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Gumpport and Pusser, 1995; McInnis, 1998; Hare and Hare, 2002; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004), and this has certainly been my experience. Consequently, the decision was made to focus the investigation on administrators who hold senior posts in academic areas that met Becher and Kogan's (1992) criteria of being base units (as opposed to central ones such as personnel, estates or finance). This decision then enabled the construction of some initial questions on which parameters could be set for finding appropriate literature for formulating the final research questions.

The initial research questions were:

- How is the role of the academic unit senior administrator defined?
 - What are their responsibilities?
 - By what process and by whom have those responsibilities been identified?
- How is the role perceived?
- How important is the role considered to be in relation to the core business (teaching and research) of the academic unit?

These questions gave a framework to the literature search that was focussed on the administrative role in higher education, its definition and current practice (Hart, 2003). This enabled a practical investigation of both printed and electronic sources in a systematic way that was directed towards the main aims of the research. The next section considers the search process the effectiveness of the decisions taken at the time.

Literature search

In this section the process of searching for and reviewing relevant literature to review is considered. The literature discovered is considered in relation to each of the provisional research questions. From this three conceptual frameworks emerge which support the development of the final questions on which the investigation is then based.

Literature search process

In order to achieve the greatest time efficiency and to ensure effective coverage of directly relevant literature, clear parameters were devised for defining the search (Wallace and Poulson, 2003). During the EdD tutorials many research papers and scholarly articles were provided and discussed, these gave a general view of what was available. However, much of the published work focused on schools and where it did consider higher education, it was largely to do with academic staff and students.

Recent personal experience of having worked in both a university and an inner city secondary school had resulted in the recognition of the very different environments, cultures and structures of each, and consequently there was a strong reluctance to use school-based literature to inform this research. Therefore, the search process

concentrated solely on literature that considered administration in higher education and mainly in the context of academic units rather than central administrative ones.

Careful consideration was given to the age of the work to be included. A prominent date in the development of modern higher education was 1992 when the former polytechnics were incorporated as universities and control by the Local Education Authorities was removed. This gave rise to the terminology referring to 'chartered' or 'traditional' universities for those that had university status prior to 1992. The terms 'statutory' or 'modern' universities became used to define those institutions that became universities in, or after, 1992.

Consequently, it was decided that 1992 was the earliest date that would be included in the search, with 2006 being the most recent, as this would give a view of what was currently being investigated and written about in the areas directly covered by the study. However, any investigation into the literature relating to sociological studies in role and role theory could be hampered by this date restriction as many of these theories have been developed over many years and referred to by current writers. Consequently, it was decided to relax the date parameter in this specific area and consider works referred to in the post 1992 higher education selection even if they were older.

Having decided on the preliminary research questions in order to focus the literature search, and defined the data parameters for publications to consider, it was possible to undertake the search in a number of stages to:

- review related professional journals already held;

- review literature provided by the EdD course team;
- identify journals, books and authors that published in the area of university administration from references quoted by the authors of these items already held;
- undertake a general electronic library catalogue search for books and journal articles that considered university administration;
- identify the types of materials likely to be most relevant and useful to the study.

The Association of University Administrators (AUA), publishes a quarterly journal entitled *Perspectives* and personal membership of the organisation since 1998 gave a strong base from which to start the search. A systematic review of each issue, starting with the oldest, gave me a clear view of current research and writing in the area of higher education administration. It also provided many references to follow up by way of journals publishing articles in this area and key authors of relevant texts. A number of authors and texts were referenced several times and making notes of these in order to follow them up at a later date to establish how pertinent they may be proved invaluable. Articles in the journal that were directly related to the main research aims were identified and collected for more detailed reading and value assessment.

A similar process was undertaken with the course and discussion notes, handouts and assignments for the EdD programme where directly relevant topics, articles and authors were identified for later investigation.

Use of electronic academic library catalogues enabled a follow up of the leads identified in the first two stages of the literature search and an assessment of relevance to this research. This supported the generation of key words that were then used to enable the setting of clear search criteria for general electronic literature searches of books and journals. The search parameters set were 'administration' and 'higher education' as more specific criteria resulted in too few returns to be useful as an overview of what was available. Having identified a wide range of sources these were then filtered down by using other criteria including 'department' and 'role'. This resulted in a reasonably manageable quantity of texts to read and consider in light of the preliminary research questions. This process also enabled the identification of a few academic journals that periodically published articles relating to administration in higher education for which publication alerts were established through Zetoc. This has enabled the identification of some very recent work to support the data analysis and development of conclusions and recommendations.

A variety of documents were recognised as being potentially valuable to this research in addition to those mentioned above, specifically documents from the higher education funding and monitoring bodies (especially the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA)) and relevant professional body policy documents. Specific searches were undertaken on the relevant web sites using the same criteria as for the other searches. My own professional knowledge and experience were invaluable for identifying the responsible bodies in this area, types of publications available and which recent ones that had impacted on university administration. However, an additional review of all

recent publications by these bodies was undertaken in order to identify documents that I had previously been unaware of.

In the succeeding sections of this chapter, the results of the literature search are considered in the context of the main research aims, each of the research questions and culminating in revised research questions.

Justification of research aims

It is widely recognised that there has been a significant increase in the number of administrative posts in universities in recent years. The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE, 2005) has recently commenced data collection and analysis relating to professional and support staff and report that their findings show that, in order to support the projected increases in student numbers:

Over 20,000 extra professional and support staff are projected to be needed in 2010-11 compared to 2003-04 levels. (p4)

However, in the following year's report there is a note that the analysis of this occupational group is presented for one year only because of "improvements in their identification and classification" (HEFCE, 2006, p25) and that readers should not use the earlier report to illustrate trends over the two year period, but rather as an illustration of one year's circumstances alone for this group of staff. The report does identify that the "most frequent primary function for professional and support staff is as a support administrator" (p3) and that this group represents 43% of the total in the overall classification of professional and support staff. Whilst clearly demonstrating that this is a significant group within the overall workforce, the comments regarding classification underpin the opinion that there is little clarification with regards to these

roles and that the sector itself is still seeking clear definitions in order to support data collection and meaningful analysis of employment trends.

It is interesting to note that this report (HEFCE, 2006) identifies a total workforce in UK universities of 284,635 full-time equivalents (FTEs), of this 46% have academic roles, 52% have professional/support roles and 2% have combined professional/support and academic roles (p6). Given that 43% of the professional/support role FTEs are designated as support administrators, this indicates that 24% of the total workforce FTE is undertaking support administrator roles which include those undertaking clerical and secretarial duties. Unfortunately it is not possible to ascertain from this report how many of these are working in academic units, but it does give some indication of the scale of the problem with obtaining meaningful definitions of roles within higher education administration.

The HEFCE reports mentioned above do appear to be starting to address the problem identified in an article by Gumport and Pusser (1995) that particularly comments on the lack of

...empirical research that directly documents administrative growth, its context, and its consequences. (p493)

Their study analyses financial data from the University of California in order to identify the growth in numbers of administrative staff compared with academic staff. It is well presented, with clear details of the methodology and presentation of the data collected, identifying changes in reporting requirements where they impact on the data and making provision for an analysis of the 'value of money' over the 25 year period under investigation. It is particularly useful in that it stresses the need to obtain clear definitions of administration and administrators in higher education (p495) and

how administrative structures might demonstrate power across the organisation, commenting on the necessary complexities required to support the diverse nature of university business (pp496-7). However, this is an American study of a very large, multi-campus organisation and as such is useful in mainly general terms in respect of this study. It supports the idea of investigation into administration and the need to identify its complex nature in order to define it effectively for the purposes of research.

Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) comment that their study of Norwegian university administration is an attempt to "... contribute to the emerging scholarly interest ..." (p455) and that previous work has focussed mainly on the cost effectiveness of administrative personnel, a concept supported by the above reference to Gumport and Pussers' (1995) work. This may have been because of the difficulty of defining the administrative role in any other way than by its cost to the institution. Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) consider quantitative data from government sources from all four Norwegian universities over a 12 year period. They consider the number of positions, grading and qualifications of post holders in order to gain an understanding of the restructuring of the administrative workforce. Similar categorisations are used in Gumport and Pusser's (1995) work; however, there is a caveat provided by Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) that these Norwegian categories are very specific to that country and that they are "... not naturally transferable to other university systems." (p457). Whilst this is true, it is interesting to note the similarity in title and activity identified with those in the American study. They also identify that:

... future research ... should include systematic and empirical studies on the *qualitative* aspects of ... the extent to which the restructuring of administrative staff has moved the administrator into a different role *vis-à-vis* academia and academic leadership ... (p470)

Both of these studies take a positivistic, quantitative stance when it comes to research, considering statistical data in order to try to describe and predict trends; however, Whitchurch (2004) develops the ideas presented by Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) and takes a more interpretivistic, qualitative approach using literature, government documentation and interviews in her study considering:

... changes in roles and identities of administrative managers, who underpin the governance of academic activity. (p280)

Whitchurch (2004) focuses on the changes to the administrative workforce in the UK within the context of the pre- and post 1992 universities as mentioned above.

Difficulty in finding terms to describe administrators is further complicated by the blurring of boundaries when it comes to supporting academic work. However, Whitchurch (2004) refers to “the interview data of the author’s own project” (p294) without giving any details of the project itself, the aims and methodology of the investigation or its overall findings. This gives rise to some doubt as to the validity of the data presented in this context. Whilst she mainly considers those working in central administrative roles such as Registry, finance and estates, the article does directly support the need for research into the nature of administrative roles in the UK and identifies a “... ‘university administration’ [that] has expanded and diversified.” (p297) and recognises the development of such roles throughout the university structure.

These three articles span the period 1995 to 2004 and they each comment on the lack of research into administrative roles in higher education. They each have similar views regarding the impact of change on the nature of administration in the context of

the academic work of the institution, and the increasing diversity of the work undertaken. This research is designed to build upon these ideas and endeavour to contribute to the growing understanding of these roles specifically within the academic unit rather than the central institutional functions.

Aspects of the investigation

Basic unit definition

A clear definition of 'academic unit' is key to enabling this research to meet its main aims. In general discussions with colleagues it was recognised that there were almost as many variations as there were titles of such groups within universities. Hogan (2005) notes that:

Universities are messy places and titles and the level of authority associated with the organisational structures are not consistent. So a faculty, or school, or department, or centre, or institute, might describe units which are actually similar or might describe units which are different in terms of function and authority, even in the same university. (p49)

Becher and Kogan's (1992) comment that a basic unit is one that has "... a corporate life ..." (p87) of its own provides a useful definition within the context of this research that is supported further by their view that:

... the key internal function of the basic unit is to define the nature and content of the unit's everyday practice, and especially that relating to teaching and caring for students. (p14)

Becher and Kogan's (1992) influential book *Process and Structure in Higher Education* results from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project during which they reviewed their earlier work on the structure of universities. The data come from publications and personal research and are presented as a theory of how the different elements of a university interact amongst themselves and with the external environment. The involvement, importance and inter-relationship of the

individual, basic unit, institution and central authority are highlighted at an operational level, and support the aim to consider how important the senior administrator role is seen to be in the context of the work of the unit and hence the institution and ultimately the central authority (eg government funding body).

There is a thorough description of university structures as perceived by the authors, but no other views are expressed. Whilst it is recognised that there may be other views of such organisational structures, these were not investigated in detail as Becher and Kogan's definitions provided a suitable basis on which to design the research questions.

Interestingly, Becher and Kogan (1992) also argue that:

Administrators have their own, quite independent, career structures. As a group they respond to almost the direct inverse of the essential academic values. Where academics value their basic units above the institution, it is the latter with whose interests the administrators identify. ... In operational terms, too, the administrators are responsible for reducing the diverse interests and activities of academic staff into coherent lines of policy and practice ... One might say that, where the latter have a perpetual tendency, both normatively and operationally, to diverge and fragment, the former typically seek convergence and cohesion. (p122)

As this book was published in 1992 and reflected the situation at that time, it would be interesting to consider how far the changing nature of higher education and associated duties since then would be reflected in current practice. In 1992 it would appear as though senior administrators were largely working at the central, institutional level with a more operationally focussed secretarial workforce in the academic units. My personal experience has been that administrators in academic units support divergence and fragmentation by assuming more responsibility for aspects of student support and administration that were hitherto the domain of their academic colleagues. With the current strong focus on research as a result of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) process and resultant funding allocations,

academic staff are encouraged to be evermore outward looking particularly in seeking external research funding, developing new knowledge and so enhancing teaching as part of their normal practice. Alongside this, the new-style senior administrators appear to work more collaboratively with academic staff on these diverse activities and interpret policies flexibly to support the overall work of the unit.

In considering the changing academic structures in UK universities by reviewing the evidence provided in the Commonwealth Universities Yearbooks produced between 1994 and 2003-04, Hogan (2005) comments that:

At the start of the 1990s, there were differences between the organisational structures in pre- and post-1992 universities. The pre-1992 universities could generally be described as having ‘predominantly discipline-led structures’ and the then polytechnics ... ‘substantially bureaucratic: hierarchical structures’. (p55)

This certainly supports Becher and Kogan’s (1992) views of where administrators and academics loyalties lay back in 1992; however, Hogan continues with illustrations of how the chartered or pre-1992 university structures are now changing and large numbers of departments focussing on discrete academic disciplines “once the key building block of most academic structures” (p55) are being combined into a smaller number of schools. As this gives the institutional management fewer units to oversee there may be the possibility that central control increases as the number of units decreases.

This is seen as being the result of more co-ordinated strategic and operational management across the sector which is resulting in the need for new systems and the establishment of larger administrative teams to support the new schools. Hogan (2005) sees this as presenting challenges and opportunities for administrators as they relieve academic colleagues of administrative responsibilities.

Whilst this publication focuses strongly on the yearbooks for information regarding the structural changes in universities over the last 10 years or so, supporting literature is cited throughout. Again, as it is both written by a senior university administrator and published in the professional journal of the AUA, I would expect to see a bias towards the necessity for the development of administration to support structural changes. However the data are clearly presented and a range of views of how and why the changes occur included.

Both Becher and Kogan's (1992) and Hogan's (2005) beliefs outlined above provide suitable support for using the academic unit as an effective location for this research.

Role definition

During the course of my EdD studies and tutorial discussions, P L Berger emerged as a significant writer in relation to role definition. However, he was writing during the 1960s and as such did not meet the date parameter set for the literature review.

However, as this is sociological work that does not focus specifically on higher education, an exception was made on the basis that his work was being quoted in publications within the specified date range despite it being published in 1963.

Berger (1963) usefully outlines the sociological theory that believes that roles are placed within a particular social context and demonstrates how expectation plays an important part of role definition:

A role, then, may be defined as a typified response to a typified expectation. Society has predefined the fundamental typology. ... The individual actors, therefore, need but slip into the roles already assigned to them ... [and] so long as they play their roles as provided for in this script, the social play can

proceed as planned. The role provides the pattern according to which the individual is to act in the particular situation. (Berger, 1963, p112)

However, this work was researched and written at a time when professional roles were seen as being prescribed and this is the overriding concept in the quotation above and throughout Berger's (1963) book. The concept is that the role and its definition enables the actor to obtain certain recognitions within and by society at large (p116), living their "... everyday lives within a complex web of recognitions and non-recognitions" (p119), resulting in the situation where "... society produces the [people] it needs." (p128). There is little acknowledgement that the individual may be at all involved in the creation of the role themselves within its organisational context, and even less that they may then influence the perceptions held by others of that role.

Jenkins (2004) on the other hand recognises that roles and statuses are not as unambiguous as many earlier sociologists believed and focuses his work in part on universities as institutions. He believes that universities could be considered to be "corporate groups" (p139) and to some extent there is a redundancy of the idea of 'role' in institutions, preferring a wider concept based on roles that include the:

... *nominal* and the *virtual* ... [allowing] us to think about the fact that abstractly collective institutionalised identifications (statuses) are occupied by embodied individuals, yet are also independent of them. (p142)

In this context the role is seen as a "... collection of rights and duties." (p140) and maintains a more personal focus than a role which is predefined and acted out by the person within the defined status to meet the expectations of others (p140).

Both Berger (1963) and Jenkins (2004) acknowledge that the sociological concept of role is largely based on theatrical ideas of role, their differences lie in whether this is a

valid concept in the world of university work. They both comment that the role of lecturer is easily understood inside and outside a university and how it accords certain responses from those in society. However, the much more recent work of Jenkins takes this thinking beyond the theatre and into higher education institutions and the realms of institutionalisation. He acknowledges the importance of the individual and the adoption of certain rights and duties by the post holders that they have control over and that are inherent in working within a particular context in a university.

McNye (2005), in considering the role of administrators in higher education communities, also acknowledges the importance of belonging in the university community (p43) showing that this can be at institutional or unit level where "... devolution and diversity characterise the best universities." (p43).

This article is based mainly on literature published in the 21st century, with a few older publications included to provide developmental context. Having started his career as an administrator and policy advisor in higher education he should be well placed to understand some of the issues surrounding the administrative role and the perceptions held of it. However, this experience appears to have been gained a number of years ago and the current analysis is as a result of his work as a consultant and trainer of higher education managers. In the context of this research, this biographical background adds weight to the usefulness of this work.

The Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) (2005) uses occupational codes to define support staff:

Non-academic staff are defined as members of staff who fall into one of the remaining 12 occupational categories such as managers, non-academic

professionals, student welfare workers, secretaries, caretakers and cleaners.
(p6)

This recognises that there is a difficulty with this process that defines academic staff before attempting other staff groups, who are then generally defined as what they are not (ie non-academic). The purpose of creating these definitions is to enable the periodic formal collection of statistical data relating to university staff employed to undertake work that is not academic in nature. Initially the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) (HESA, 2005, p6) provided by the government was considered as it would have allowed for comparative studies “to be made with other sectors of the economy” (HESA, 2005, p6). However, it was recognised that these “... did not provide an intuitive method of classifying occupations within higher education ...”(p6), so 13 broad occupational categories were created, of which only one was academic professionals, all the other 12 categories related to occupations found in higher education institutions that supported academics. Interestingly there is no mention of administration anywhere in the definitions provided, and:

... non-academic staff are defined as members of staff ... such as managers, non-academic professionals, student welfare workers, secretaries, caretakers and cleaners ... (p6)

It is interesting to note that HEFCE (2005b) research and statistical data categories now include ‘professional and support staff’ (p4) from 2002/03 and:

... support administrators, the largest group, make up 41% of all staff with professional and support roles. (p33)

If administration was not one of the occupations defined originally for this data gathering, then there must have been some changes in categorisation in the interim, the reasons for which are not specified in the documentation publicly available.

However, the only definition is of:

... staff with professional/support roles ... who have a professional/support contract at some point during the academic year ... [and] ... professional and

support staff ... who have a total FTE (full time equivalent contract) of at least 40% ... (p6)

Whilst it is recognised that these statistical returns have a specific purpose to provide government departments with data to analyse performance against targets, it is important to acknowledge that administrators are now a recognised occupational group in higher education by the funding body. However, within the context of this research, this definition is too broad as it encompasses all administrators whether they are working in central departments (eg Finance, Personnel etc), support areas (eg Catering, Accommodation etc) or in academic units. I believe that there would be some scope to further define these occupational groupings to show whether the responsibilities are for academic units or other areas of the university.

The Research Questions

The research questions relating to the definition of the senior administrator role have been designed to incorporate sociological perspectives, practitioner views and governmental ideas outlined above, especially in the context of the questions relating to how the roles have been defined in terms of processes and responsibilities.

Research Question 1: What are academic unit senior administrators' main duties and responsibilities?

Following on from the idea of rights, responsibilities and duties outlined above, the aim of this research is to find out what senior administrators in academic units actually do within their areas of responsibility. It is widely recognised that there is a lack of clarity with regards to this (Dobson and Conway, 2003; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2004), so a crucial aspect of this study is to find out what one particular section of the workforce is actually responsible for.

Hare and Hare (2002) describe the senior administrator role in an academic unit as being responsible for setting up and maintaining integrated administrative systems that support the delivery of a high quality service to staff and students and across the unit's "whole range of academic activities" (p34). This administrator is also responsible for overseeing specialist staff who deal with "admissions and recruitment, examinations and module reviews, and research support, in addition to computer officers, clerical officers, a technician and secretaries" (p34). This practitioner article is based on the personal experiences of a head of an academic unit and the senior administrator working in that unit. It does explain the basis on which it was written and is well supported by other literature. However, the data on which the analyses are based are very subjective and there has been no attempt to triangulate the findings with those of other research or post holders in other units or institutions. Despite these reservations, this article is of use for the formulation of the research questions as it focuses on someone actually holding and developing such a post.

McNye (2005) identifies a number of other duties and responsibilities of university administrators with a key role as gatekeeper within institutions that are operating on increasingly global scales (p43). Within this role he believes that they are able to bring continuity as they are "... the keepers of the community memory, through minutes, data, reports and so on." (p43). Furthermore, they are responsible for "monitoring and interpreting changes and analysing their potential impact on their academic communities" (p43). Whilst commenting that people performing academic unit administrative roles are:

... there at times when academic colleagues are not, to support the student experience. Which, in the end, is what administration is about – care in the academic community. (pp43-4)

The professional body for university administrators, the Association of University Administrators (AUA) publishes a range of documents for those seeking or developing careers as administrators in higher education, including a Fact Sheet (AUA, 2004) outlining the responsibilities of these roles, and part of the analysis of the data obtained during this research is to find out whether professional expectations match operational activity. This is particularly important in the context of the potential for this investigation to inform this professional body's training and development programme.

The AUA (2004) acknowledges that there is a wide range of activities within the administrator's remit that often includes student matters, drafting and interpreting regulations, quality assurance, student recruitment and support, and industrial relations amongst them. There is a recognition that there are generally two categories of administrator, "generalist and specialist" (p2), with relevant professional qualifications being required for the latter group (eg unit accountant).

Szekeres (2004) draws upon data from academic, government and literary sources to provide a very useful outline of the responsibilities often undertaken by people working in universities in roles that are considered to be administrative:

... their focus is about either supporting the work of academic staff, dealing with students on non-academic matters or working in an administrative function such as finance, human resources, marketing, public relations, business development, student administration, academic administration, library, information technology, capital or property. (p8)

There is an implication that these may be separate roles; however, my experience is that many academic unit senior administrators will have many of these responsibilities

within their remit and it is interesting to consider the breadth of the roles investigated. Again this paper is used with some caution as it is based on Australian government statistics and largely Australian practitioner articles, although there are clear references from a wider literature and the UK and Australian higher education systems have a number of similarities of administration and processes. For the purposes of this study, the outline quoted above serves as a valuable tool when analysing case-study data and on that basis has been included.

The Government papers, practitioner articles and professional body careers advice documents all agree that this group of staff is undertakes a complex and wide range of responsibilities that are rapidly changing and merging with, or taking over activities that were traditionally academic responsibilities. This research question regarding what senior administrators in academic units actually are responsible for is informed by and will hopefully add to this area of developing knowledge.

Research Question 2: How are these duties and responsibilities identified?

This question aims to consider the processes by which the senior administrator role has come into existence and the ways in which the duties and responsibilities have been identified as being part of a specific role.

Hare and Hare (2002) describe a role that has evolved as the academic unit structure in which it is situated has changed. A particular focus, shared by Gornitzka and Larsen (2004), is the changing responsibilities of the head of unit as a result of quality and accountability measures imposed by the government and the institution. These changes have meant that the head of unit is unable to undertake all the required reporting and monitoring activity without the involvement and support of other staff. In this case Hare and Hare (2002) describe the development of a Head of Support Team role growing out of a senior administrative officer role (p34) to support the head of unit, thereby enabling the effective management of the academic unit within a changing environment.

HEFCE (2005), on the other hand, takes a more strategic view of the growth and development of the administrative staff whereby they provide projections of headcounts needed in order to maintain the status quo in different scenarios of student recruitment over the period 2003-04 to 2010-11 (p36). There is no analysis of what administrative support might be needed, it has purely been based on a statistical formula that is the same as the one applied to academic staff when determining the number of new recruits required to support specific numbers of students. It will be interesting to find out if any of the administrators involved in my research comment

on the impact of changes in student recruitment trends on their role definition and whether this is due to increases or decreases in numbers.

The professional body, the AUA (2004) takes a professional development view that better qualified and trained administrators are more able to undertake professional responsibilities at higher levels within the organisation. Does this imply an element of role accretion whereby "... new tasks are added to existing types of positions..." (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004, p463), rather than "status creation" when new positions are created that have "... specialised functions that differ from those already established in the university system ..." (pp463-4)?

Both Hare and Hare (2002) and Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) imply that these roles are developing organically from existing support roles and have not been identified as specific roles required within a particular type of organisational structure. My own experience is that the role develops according to the need of the academic unit for specific services (eg budget management) or the imposition of performance management and accountability procedures by the institution itself. However, it may be that institutions are beginning to take the initiative and decide which specialist administrative roles are required in order to manage their business successfully, and this is where the AUA's (2004) view that administrators need better qualifications to respond to the sector's requirements will be borne out.

Research Question 3: How are these roles perceived?

The literature outlined below demonstrates that this role is perceived in many different ways within the sector and this question aims to develop an understanding of these views.

The perception held by Dobson and Conway (2003) that "... few administrators see their own role as being fundamental to the core business of universities ..." (p131) is one that I would dispute from my own professional practice and experience and the beliefs held by the professional body (AUA, 2004). Furthermore it is an unsubstantiated claim within the text, appearing to be the conclusion drawn by the authors from their studies. This article appears in a journal published by an Australian higher education professional body and is in essence a literature review. Whilst it is a useful article in the context of this study, I have some reservations regarding statements that purport to represent current practice and understanding in 2003 when it was published. All of the literature it reviews with one exception was published before 2000, with the oldest dated 1968 and the newest 2002. The abstract for this article writes in the present tense, referring to the 'modern university' (p123) as being one functioning at the date of publication, also noting the "... complex and influential nature of the administrative role in the new century ..." (p124) and therefore leading the reader to surmise that the conclusions drawn refer directly to the current situation in universities. This may be the case; however, the authors do not address this in their work and this does cast some doubt as to the reliability of the article and its findings.

Dobson and Conway (2003) consider that administrators themselves are largely responsible for the way that their non-administrative colleagues see them, believing that they:

... will need to clarify the knowledge base, skills and expertise they bring to university management and, perhaps more importantly, to define how their work contributes to the teaching and research that is the core business of the universities. (p131)

McInnis (1998) on the other hand, comments that administrators "... have a negative view of the relationship between themselves and academics ..." (p166) and that this can cause tensions that are exacerbated by changing roles and dissolving boundaries between academic and administrative responsibilities. There are clearly instances where heads of academic units rely on the academic unit administrator to significantly contribute to the management of the unit (Hare and Hare, 2002). Another view is held by Conway (2000) in an article published in a professional university management journal that considers what sort of name should be given to administrators in universities. It reflects on how the professional body, to whom the publication belongs, supports and develops its members, and what it can do to develop an appropriate perception within the university of what this occupational group does. The comment is made that "... it is hard to convince others that you are a professional if you belong to an occupational group which cannot agree on what it should be called ..." (p200).

These different foci of responsibility and impact will be an interesting aspect of the investigation in this study and will be building upon these earlier works. There is also the possibility that these roles may be thought to be in conflict with the academic roles in the academic unit (Whitchurch, 2004; Dobson and Conway, 2003) and may be perceived to be competitors when specialist responsibilities are undertaken.

Another perception, held by the government's funding body is that the administrator role is "... facilitating academic activity [and] is crucial to the sector's success ..."

(HEFCE, 2004, p36). This research considers how far the post holders and their colleagues from across the institution see the role as essential to the efficient and effective running of the academic unit, and ultimately the institution itself.

In a keynote address given to the Association of University Administrators (AUA) Annual Conference entitled "The importance of professional university administration; a perspective from a senior university manager", Bassnett (2005) emphasises the changing nature of the role of the senior university administrator in the context of fast-paced changes in higher education as a result of government accountability and governance agendas. She comments that administrators are:

... increasingly entering into domains that were once the primary responsibility of academics or academics working alongside administrators, domains involving students." (p101)

Bassnett (2005) further describes changes taking place for the academic workforce of universities and the need for them to consider research and teaching almost as separate activities. This, Bassnett believes, has resulted in additional changes as the:

Administrations necessarily become more professionalised, a consequence of increased numbers, increased income-earning activity, split sites, which require a lot of organisation, so the relationship between academics and administrators is less clearly defined. (p101)

As this speech was to a major annual conference of university administrators it is unlikely to present their profession in anything other than a positive light, although comments are contained that indicate that the speaker's opinions are not shared by all senior university managers (p102) where some do not believe in the value of the contribution made by senior administrators, seeing them as being more of an intrusion than a support. The overarching theme of this speech is that the role of the senior

administrator is essential to the working life of a university in the 21st century, whilst recognising that the traditional academic colleague may not have such a clear understanding of this.

Any tensions may appear to be less severe when the administrator has previously worked as a researcher and/or an academic before taking up an administrative role. Seyd (2000) writes of personal experiences of this transition and comments that her history enabled her to be "... at ease with the academic culture ..." (p35) whilst also experiencing some of the tensions reported by administrators without such a career path to draw upon. This provides a very useful insight into both academic and administrative views of the academic unit senior administrator from a personal perspective which strongly reflects the aim of this research. Seyd (2000) considers the direction of loyalties and workload priorities of both groups and identifies areas of potential tension, opening up an avenue of data analysis relating to activities undertaken and perceptions held by the post holders and to the career paths taken by those aspiring to such positions in administration.

Based on an empirical study of a number of universities in Australia, Szekeres (2006) notes that:

... the decline in academic and administrative staff working together on activities such as enrolment and admissions have all contributed to a more stressful, distrustful and less congenial workplace. (p143)

Szekeres (2006) included administrators from academic units amongst many central units; however, the data and analyses do not permit the extrapolation of any information relating specifically to the basic unit administrators. The interview quotations are just attributed to 'interviewee' and give no indication where the

respondent works or the post held. I believe this to be a short-coming in data presentation as there is less expectation of central staff working closely with academics than for academic unit colleagues. Consequently it is difficult to ascertain where the data for the above quotation originate. However, in the context of developing the questions for my research, it is an interesting concept that the changing areas of responsibility have apparently placed barriers between the two occupational groupings.

A number of years before Szekeres' (2006) paper, Duke (2002) noted that he believed the changes in university structures were placing strong demands on colleagues to be able to develop effective networking strategies internally as well as externally in order that the organisation, and by implication the academic unit, may achieve the success it strives for. This book is a personal account of management and how it is changing in universities without any specific focus on administrators or academics. He uses experiences gained in Australia and the UK on which to base much of the content and as such this is a useful text for considering some of the wider issues that could cause changes in the effectiveness of working relationships between administrators and academic colleagues. However, it does not provide any useful insight into the specific roles of academic unit senior administrators.

Professionalisation and professional administration (Dobson, 2000; Middlehurst, 2000; Dobson and Conway, 2003; AUA, 2004; Bassnett, 2005) are concepts that are frequently raised within the literature reviewed. However, there is normally little attempt to define these terms and provide any illustrations of what they mean in operational terms.

In a speech delivered to a conference of university administrators Middlehurst (2000) identifies four key aspects of professionalism: "... skills, authority, standards and autonomy ..." (p102) and goes on to comment that increasingly professional administrators are being required to demonstrate multiple skills across a number of highly specialised areas. This results in authority having to be earned rather than being assumed as a right in a "... constant series of negotiations ...". Furthermore, the ever changing nature of higher education will require the frequent re-statement of authority (p102) in an ever widening network of environments. This concept is very interesting in the context of developing effective working relationships that enable a culture of partnership rather than conflict. Again some caution should be exercised as this speech was written for administrators and as such may be more positively focussed than if it was delivered to a different occupational group; however, it raises the issues of skills and authority in the context of professionalism and as such will prove useful background for the development of interview questions and the analysis of data obtained.

Lauwerys (2002) reflects on how far higher education administrative staff have developed a "... true professional standing ..." (p95) and comments that:

... we still have a way to go before full professional status is achieved and it may be that we can never expect to become a capital P profession like medicine or law in the sense of possessing a unique body of knowledge. We should, however, expect to be very professional in what we do and increasingly to gain some of the key characteristics of a well-established profession. (p95)

Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) believe that there are "different types of processes of professionalisation of administrative staff" (p470) and that:

... they encompass the following elements: (1) increase in formal status of administrative positions, (2) increase in the requirements for formal educational qualification to hold administrative positions, (3) emergence of a common cognitive basis, and (4) the growth and formalisation of networks between personnel in administrative positions. (pp462-3)

These views appear to work well together and be supported by those others outlined above regarding the perceptions held of and by administrators. My own experience is that there is a growing trend in universities to recognise academic unit senior administrators as well qualified, highly experienced and able colleagues, who are able and willing to undertake a broad range of responsibilities and duties flexibly and to a high standard. Ironically it is this very breadth of responsibility that is likely to forever prevent the attainment of a unique body of knowledge such as that held by those in medicine or law, thereby increasing the likelihood of stating that university administration will be seen as undertaking a professional role rather than being identifiable as a profession in its own right.

The next section summarises the themes considered during and arising from the literature review and identifies a number of conceptual frameworks on which to base the research process and subsequent data analysis.

Summary of key issues and themes from the literature

The fact that there has been very little research into the nature of the role of university administrators in the UK, and hardly any at all focussing on the academic unit senior administrator, makes this an interesting and potentially very useful study, especially in the context of the need and demand for the professional development of administrative staff at institutional and professional body levels.

The literature review is closely focussed on university administrators and the specific issues that underpin the main aims of this investigation. Consequently, a number of key themes are both supported by, and emergent from, the literature reviewed. In addition to the basic unit definition which has provided the means of locating the research within an institution, these themes fall into a number of distinct areas:

- role definition;
- identification of duties and responsibilities;
- role perception.

Within each of these areas there are a number of sub-themes which provide areas to focus on during the data gathering process.

The aspects of role definition emerging from this review are mainly in the areas of how far the role has been defined by the institution itself, or by the academic unit in which it is located in response to local need, or by the individual post holder themselves as they develop and use their own skills in relation to the work emerging from the changing nature of higher education and associated administration.

The duties and responsibilities of this role are again linked to a number of different aspects of definition and fall mainly into three areas including how well defined they are, what the nature and range of duties undertaken is, and to what extent the current duties and responsibilities were previously undertaken by academic staff.

The authors of the literature reviewed in the context of perceptions held of the role raised the importance of being aware that the understanding of these roles was different depending on the viewpoint of the stakeholder, and that the main stakeholders were: the senior management of the institution, the academic unit head and the academic unit senior administrator in post (the individual). The perceptions outlined in the literature demonstrate views of: the importance of the role to the core business of the unit, the nature of the working relationship between the unit senior administrator and academic colleagues, and the professionalisation of the role.

In the next section I consider how this literature review has impacted on my original research questions and give the final questions and associated conceptual frameworks on which my Research Design is based and discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Final research questions and emerging conceptual frameworks

The final research questions are based on the themes and ideas raised in the literature reviewed, and from which a number of conceptual frameworks have emerged. Each of the frameworks links to one of the research questions and demonstrates an initial understanding of what the literature review has revealed.

Final research questions

This review underpins and provides a focus for this investigation, with three clear themes emerging to respond to the main research aims. The resultant overriding central research question comprises three parts: how did the roles come about, what are the post holder's duties and responsibilities, and how is the role perceived.

Furthermore, the literature review reveals a number of sub-themes to each of these main questions which are incorporated into the final research questions (below) in order to support a fuller understanding of the role being investigated.

These final research questions and the associated sub-questions are:

- 1) By what process has the role of academic unit senior administrator been defined?**
 - 1a) How far has it been a central university creation?
 - 1b) How far has it been developed by the head of the academic unit?
 - 1c) How far has the post holder been involved in the process of definition?
- 2) How is the role itself defined in relation to duties and responsibilities?**
 - 1a) How clearly defined is the area of responsibility?
 - 1b) How broad is the range of duties and responsibilities undertaken?

1c) How far were these duties and responsibilities once the realm of the academic staff?

3) How is the role perceived by the different stakeholders (post holder, academic unit head and senior managers) in relation to:

1a) the importance of the role to the core business of the unit;

1b) the nature of the working relationship between the unit senior administrator and academic colleagues;

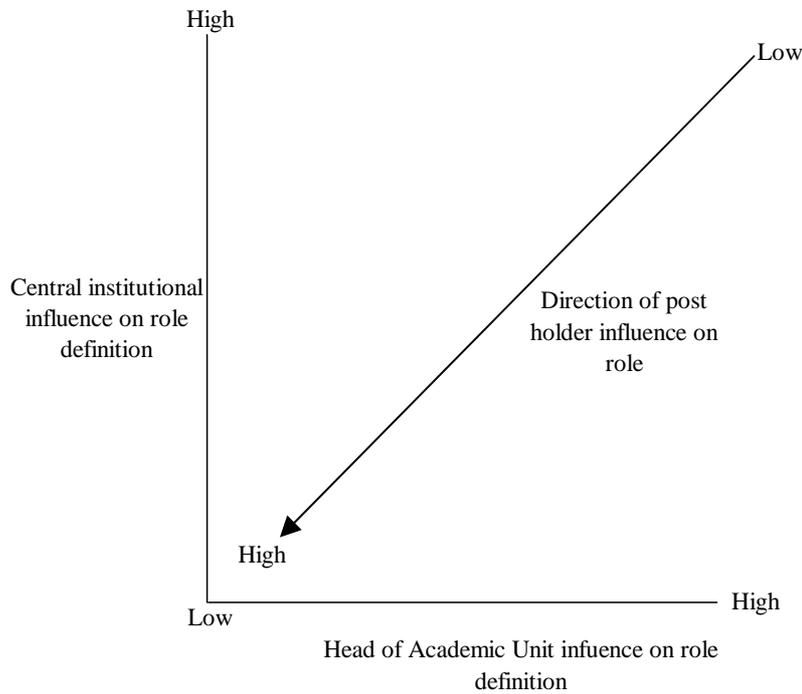
1c) and the professionalisation of the role?

Each of these questions raises the suggestion that there may be links between different aspects of each of them, and that there is an initial conceptual framework within which to consider how the data is sought and analysed. Each of these research questions is considered in turn below and the emerging framework illustrated and discussed.

1) By what process has the role of academic unit senior administrator been defined?

This research question and its sub-questions consider the levels of influence on the processes by which the role has been defined or created within the institution. There appear to be two main axes; one showing the high or low levels of central, institutional control and the other, the levels of influence exerted by the head of the academic unit itself. Framework 1 below illustrates how the level of influence exerted impacts on how far the post holder is able to influence the role, with the highest levels of individual influence coming to bear when the central and head of academic unit levels are at their lowest.

Framework 1 - Direction of post holder influence on role

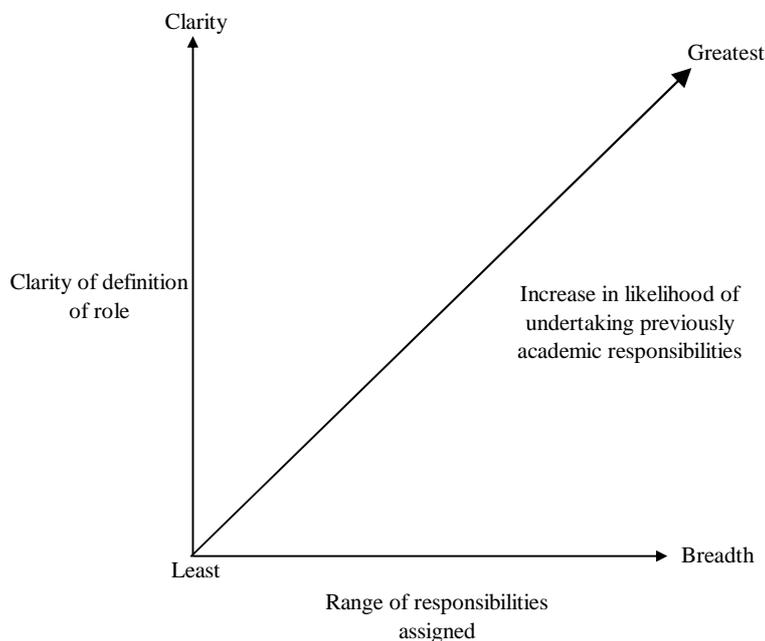


The literature reveals that there is a tendency for the senior administrator role to be developed by the academic unit out of another role already in existence (Hare and Hare, 2002), whilst a greater or lesser influence is being exerted by the institution. Berger (1963) and Jenkins (2004) consider the concept that a role is independent of the post holder and may have an existence that is definable by the organisation in which it is situated. Gornitzka and Larsen's (2004) views of role accretion, where the role develops organically out of another existing role, may be in opposition to role creation, where the role is created independently and then taken up by a post holder and is part of this framework considering the processes of role definition.

2) How is the role itself defined in relation to duties and responsibilities?

This question is based on issues relating to how clearly the role's duties and responsibilities are defined and the range of responsibilities assigned. There is some evidence from the literature that the role changes with a greater range of areas of responsibility (AUA, 2004) and consequently it is seen as being more or less likely to take on responsibilities that were previously the remit of academic staff (Hare and Hare, 2002). Where the role has taken on more duties and responsibilities that were previously undertaken by academic staff, in addition to the more traditional administrative work expected of them, this appears to be due to higher clarity in the definition of the role coupled with a greater range of responsibilities to be undertaken.

Framework 2 - Likelihood of role undertaking responsibilities previously assigned to academics



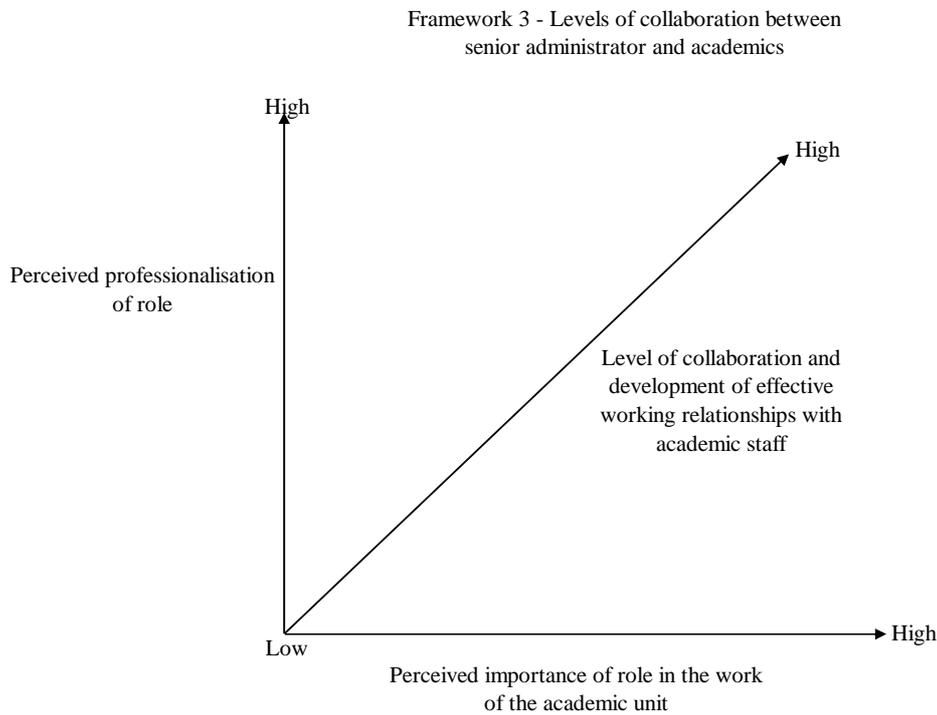
Framework 2 (above) shows that the greater the range of duties and responsibilities and the greater the clarity of the definition of the role, the greater the increase of the likelihood of the role having responsibilities that were hitherto the responsibility of

academic colleagues. Where a role has neither a broad range of duties, nor a clear definition there is less chance of the role having responsibilities that have originated from both administrative and academic areas.

3) How is the role perceived by the different stakeholders (post holder, academic unit head and senior managers)?

This question considers how the role is perceived by the three groups of stakeholders and acknowledges that the different perceptions emerging from the literature fall into three significant sub-themes of involvement in the core business of the unit, relationships with academic staff, and professionalisation of the role. HEFCE (2004) and Bassnett (2005) both believe that the administrator's role is essential to the success of the sector, and by implication the academic unit. However, Dobson and Conway (2003), feel that there is some loss to this importance where the perception held by the post holder is that their role is not in itself important, or where there has been loss of collaboration between academic staff and administrators on certain aspects of work that traditionally had involved working closely together. There is growing recognition that the role demands ever higher level professional skills in the execution of its duties and responsibilities (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; Middlehurst, 2000) and that these skills in turn raise the perceptions held by others of the role and post holders (Bassnett, 2005). Where the levels of perceived professionalisation and perceived importance of the role in the work of the academic unit are achieved then the levels of collaborative working are at their highest.

These can be brought together in a framework (Framework 3 below) that links the level of perceived professionalisation of the role with that of the importance placed on the role within the overall work of the academic unit. Where both of these levels of perception are high, then there is a greater likelihood that collaborative working relationships are developed between the senior administrator and academic colleagues.



These three conceptual frameworks have emerged from the literature reviewed and they outline 1) how the different opinions may link together to give a framework to aid our understanding of how the roles have been defined originally, 2) what sort of duties and responsibilities they have and 3) how they are perceived by the post holders and significant others and are important to the core business of the unit in which they work.

Conclusion

This literature review has enabled the development of the provisional research questions regarding the nature of the role of senior administrators in academic units in higher education. It has identified that a need exists for further research in this area and the reasons for this. Whilst some scholars and practitioners have undertaken work in this area, there remains a common claim that the role of the university administrator is largely ill-defined, poorly understood and insufficiently appreciated.

The inclusion of publications from 1992 to 2006 has enabled a view over time and allows for the changes in university management structures since the incorporation of the polytechnics in 1992. It is interesting to note that the most recent publications echo the same themes as the earliest ones, and that there are continuing pleas for further research into administrative roles in higher education.

The research questions have refined and extended the investigation into what the post holders are responsible for and how they are perceived to include perceptions from other managers at different levels in the institution. These are based on three conceptual frameworks that have emerged during the literature review regarding the levels of influence the post holder has on the definition of the role, the circumstances that surround the assignment of responsibilities that were previously undertaken by academic staff, and the nature of the perceptions held that promote collaborative working between senior administrators and academic staff.

Clearly university administration is an important aspect of work and employment in higher education and is becoming more widely considered in educational research.

This study builds on the work already published and raises suggestions for other studies to continue the task of developing further our understanding of how administrators working in the academic units contribute to the work of that unit and by implication the higher education institution itself. The next chapter considers the issues of research design relevant to this investigation and includes a discussion of the associated literature.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This chapter considers the process by which the research design was chosen to support an effective and efficient investigation based on three main research questions focussing on senior administrators in academic units. There are a number of sections that address the overall purpose and reason for the research, the wider frameworks within which it is located, the philosophical approach being taken, the research strategy, methodology and methods, the management of the overall research project and details of the processes to be used for the data analysis.

The development of, and/or challenge to, the conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature review rely on obtaining relevant, rich data regarding people's perceptions of the various aspects of the senior administrator role identified in the key research questions. It is essential that the data can be analysed and evaluated to provide answers to these questions and evidence to support or refute the frameworks.

The literature points quite strongly to the impact different perceptions can have on the effectiveness of the post. This can range from the post-holders feeling that the role is quite insignificant (Dobson and Conway, 2003), through no-one really knowing what the roles are for (Conway, 2000), to the belief that operationally they are essential for the academic unit's smooth running (Hare and Hare, 2002), right up to the national funding body stating in its strategic plan that it believes support staff to be essential to the continued and future success of higher education (HEFCE, 2004). Consequently, opinions on how the role is seen by other managers and how far it is seen to be

important to the overall work of the academic unit are sought in this research. An interesting aspect will be to find out what these perceptions are across the different levels of the organization, senior managers, middle managers (Heads of School, Deans of Faculty) and academic unit senior administrators.

The development of the research questions is addressed in the previous chapter; however, the questions form the basis for the research design and are repeated here to provide the context for the discussion regarding research design in this chapter:

4) By what process has the role of academic unit senior administrator been defined?

- 1a) How far has it been a central university creation?
- 1b) How far has it been developed by the head of the academic unit?
- 1c) How far has the post holder been involved in the process of definition?

5) How is the role itself defined in relation to duties and responsibilities?

- 1a) How clearly defined is the area of responsibility?
- 1b) How broad is the range of duties and responsibilities undertaken?
- 1c) How far were these duties and responsibilities once the realm of the academic staff?

6) How is the role perceived by the different stakeholders (post holders, academic unit heads and senior managers) in relation to:

- 1a) the importance of the role to the core business of the unit;
- 1b) the nature of the working relationship between the unit senior administrator and academic colleagues;
- 1c) and the professionalisation of the role?

My own career history and current role as a senior administrator in an academic unit of a university have influenced my choice of research topic and these questions. I have found that I have received a mixed response from colleagues over the years as to their expectations of the senior administrator role and the level of responsibility associated with it and recognized by them. There have been conversations about whether the role itself requires the post-holder to undertake certain responsibilities in a particular manner, or whether it is just the incumbent's own personal approach, training and experience that have defined the role in the way that it is executed. Certainly there appears to have been a lack of clarity of role definition and also ineffective communication of areas of responsibility in some cases. This can lead to misunderstandings and even tensions where duties are being duplicated with academic staff or neglected because of lack of awareness of need. My current role, to which I will return later in this chapter in respect of the influence it has had on my research design and data analysis, has been quite different from my previous experiences and brings another perspective to the findings and conclusions.

As an important aim of this research is to gain some understanding of people's perceptions of what these roles are and how they are developing, this research is being undertaken from a subjective, anti-positive stance. Initially there is a belief that people's knowledge and understanding of these issues are based on their own personal experience and insight. Institutions may, or may not, have policies and procedures for creating and developing these roles, but it is the interpretation of these by the respondents that will constitute the data and from which the conclusions will be formulated.

In order to undertake this research the decision needs to be taken regarding not only what is to be researched, but where this fits within current thinking, where it might develop and inform these ideas and what wider frameworks could help to provide a clearer focus.

Furthermore, in deciding on an appropriate research strategy it is essential to identify what sort of data are needed and consider what options are available for collecting and analysing those data. Just by undertaking these stages the importance of research management throughout the project is emphasised. From the very beginning it was clear that there would need to be a strong definition of what was being investigated and the purpose of the research so that there was minimal chance of being sidetracked on to other interesting ideas that may arise. However, it was also essential to be open to new ideas and not enter any particular aspect of this investigation with too many preconceptions or biases towards the investigation or the findings. Further consideration of this dilemma is included in the research management section below.

Wider Frameworks

There are a number of reasons for undertaking this research that focus both on my own personal professional development and also on contributing to the existing work in this area. It is hoped that both of these aims together will also contribute to the wider professional development issues and the growing understanding of what these roles can contribute to organisational success from institutional, professional body and individual standpoints.

Whilst endeavouring to situate this investigation within wider research frameworks I considered my personal interests with a view towards understanding these roles better so that I could develop my own career more effectively. This led initially to the consideration of Wallace and Poulson's (2003) five types of intellectual project: knowledge-for-understanding, knowledge-for-critical evaluation, knowledge-for-action, instrumentalism and reflexive action. The first of these, knowledge-for-understanding is described as:

... attempting to develop theoretical and research knowledge from a disinterested standpoint towards an aspect of the social world in order to understand, rather than improve, practice and policy and their underlying ideologies. (p23)

This was not without its problems though, as I thought that I was probably unable to consider this from a 'disinterested standpoint' as I was most definitely personally involved with what I was planning to research. Recalling the need to make familiar situations and events appear strange (Delamont, 1996) gave me some assistance with developing a more disassociated view. Furthermore, the actual circumstances surrounding the data gathering meant that this personal understanding of the research context proved to be one of the most helpful aspects in this process and will be considered again later in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Just the act of considering these frameworks encouraged a rethink about the actual purpose of the research and how it could be of more use than just for my own personal professional development, important though that was. The idea then grew that there may be a possibility to provide information that could contribute towards other senior administrators' personal development and inform those aspiring to such a role. It was envisaged that the findings of this research may be able to inform the

professional development programmes of both my own and the case study institutions and the specific professional qualifications offered by the professional body for university administrators, The Association of University Administrators (AUA). This then caused some problems with the knowledge-for-understanding framework, as it was no longer a case of just trying to understand something, but that development programmes could change or be developed as a result of what was being done. This led to the consideration of knowledge-for-action research, which is

... attempting to develop theoretical and research knowledge with practical application from a positive standpoint towards policy and practice within the prevailing ideology. (Wallace and Poulson, 2003, p23)

The other three types of project were considered and discounted as they were inappropriate to this research. Knowledge-for-critical evaluation takes a deliberately negative standpoint to existing policies or practices in order to criticise and expose injustice with a view to change. Instrumentalism imparts knowledge through training and consultancy, and reflexive action focuses directly on the practitioner's own practice with the purpose of making improvements. There is no intention to take a negative standpoint with this research as the aim is to find out how the roles have been created and are now perceived. Whilst there may well be some opportunity to use the outcomes of this investigation within a training context, it is mainly concerned with developing understanding that can then be used to inform practice, rather than direct consultancy and training. There may also be elements of reflection on my personal professional practice within the research, but as this is not the main aim this final type of intellectual framework is also not relevant to this context.

Whitchurch's (2004) view that there is a need for clear definitions of what a higher education administrator's role is, may reflect research within a knowledge-for-

understanding framework where there is an attempt to understand what is happening to university administrators as an employment group. However, Gornitzka and Larsen (2004), Dobson and Conway (2003) and Whitchurch (2004) are all people who work, or have worked, in administrative roles in universities which would make it very difficult for them to take a completely disinterested standpoint. This is supported by their texts where they comment from personal experience, as well as empirical studies and literature reviews. So the conclusion was drawn that they were possibly hoping that their work would inform some changes to policy and/or practice.

On further reflection on just how this research might change policy and practice, it is possible that this research may:

- improve personal professional practice;
- enable reflection on the part of case study participants of their professional involvement in their role's development;
- enable the provision of information to support the development of professional training programmes and individual career planning either at institutional or professional body level through discussion with these stakeholders;
- and make a contribution to the empirical work in this field considering the development of the overall understanding of the senior administrator role and its contribution to institutional success.

This leads to a problematic situation as there is a possible change to practice inferred by these outcomes, although the influence on policy is less likely as the focus is on operational matters rather than those of institutional policy. Nevertheless, the knowledge-for-understanding framework specifically states it is looking to understand

rather than to improve practice. The aims are very strongly to try to improve personal practice at least and to contribute to an overall developing area of knowledge that is hoping to improve practice in general terms. Consequently it appears that the knowledge-for-action framework is the most relevant to this project.

Considering these frameworks and their associated foci on research purpose had some influence on how the questions to be asked of the respondents were constructed and to whom they would be addressed. The initial idea had been to obtain data from academic unit senior administrators alone, but it became apparent from the literature and personal experience that a wider picture was needed if the outcomes were to inform personal professional practice, the relevant professional body and institutional staff development. This further contributed to the stratified sample used in this research. These focus on obtaining data relating to perceptions held at various levels of management in order to broaden the evidence base from which data could be obtained and the methods of selecting the research population and data collection methods will be discussed later in this chapter.

Philosophical approach

Having established that this research is within the knowledge-for-action framework because it is hoped that it will inform and improve practice as well as develop personal understanding, it was also important to gain some realisation of what sort of knowledge might be discovered. It was unlikely that there would be the opportunity to demonstrate a law such as the law of gravity whereby a rock falling from the top of a cliff will always fall downwards. In the context of this research, this type of law would have to demonstrate that there were certain characteristics of role definition

that never changed, regardless of the personnel involved or the context in which it was taking place. Whilst not wanting to make too many assumptions about how the research may proceed, personal experience and the literature underpinning this investigation would indicate that there would be many understandings of the same things and that these would lead to different truths for different people, just as there are many different roles and responsibilities for administrators in different organizations.

Cohen *et al* (2003) outline two conceptions of social science that describe social reality either as subjective, where experiences are exclusively part of the individual human experience and perception, or as objective, which is something that is external to the individual and capable of being experienced in the same way by all. These conceptions of social experience and understanding provide a framework within which to reflect on the importance of personal perception on understanding that has been expressed in some of the literature reviewed as part of this investigation and on the research itself. These are the subjective and objective dimensions of approaches to social science research, whereby the subjective dimension views social knowledge to be based on experience and personal perceptions, whilst the objective stance believes the world to be capable of observation by individuals as a given, external reality. The purpose of identifying which paradigm my research belongs to is that the two extremes require different research designs in order to provide appropriate data for analysis.

The subjective view requires data that demonstrate different understandings and perceptions of the issue being investigated, whilst the objective approach is more

concerned with how the influences of the external environment determine one's life and work with little influence from the perceptions held by those involved. Therefore this investigation is being undertaken within the subjective paradigm and not the objective one. This is because I believe that there will be different views of the roles being considered, and although there may be some overlap and commonly held views, it is unlikely that everyone will have the same perceptions and experiences regardless of their position within the environment. This concept of the perception of knowledge being particular to each individual in each different context is echoed in the literature where there are comments about role ambiguity (Whitchurch, 2004) and the difficulty of finding a generic definition in light of the different views of what the role entails (Conway, 2000) and the circumstances of its implementation.

To further develop this framework for understanding the nature of experience, within this subjectivist/objectivist approach there is an ontological debate concerning the nominalist and realist views of meaning. These relate more to the use of words to gain and transmit understanding than the social experience contexts of the subjective/objective paradigms within which they are located.

Linked with the subjective approach, the nominalist view is that knowledge is created through words, how they are used and understood by individuals and that there are no independent attributes or events that give a constant, unique meaning to those words within that context (Cohen *et al*, 2003). Whereas realists within the objective paradigm believe that there is no dependence on the individual to create meaning from words, and that the meaning exists in a way that is external to those using it.

The nominalist view appears to be held quite widely in the literature reviewed for this investigation as there is a strong theme running through it that there is a problem with the use of words to describe the senior administrator role, with people demonstrating a variety of ways of understanding of words used to describe and identify it and its responsibilities. As this research attempts to contribute to understanding individual's perceptions of their particular role within a specific society, this nominalist approach appeared most relevant. However, it may be an overstatement to say that words are always understood in different ways in similar contexts.

Cohen *et al* (2003) also describe realism as the contrary view to nominalism. Realism seeks to believe that things have an identity and meaning of their own that do not depend upon the individual for their definition. Taking this view would mean that all the words used to describe the senior administrator role, its duties and responsibilities, were equally understood by all people in all relevant contexts. Personal experience has demonstrated that there are some common understandings of words used to describe specific, academic unit and higher education related responsibilities and activities; although there are greater variances of understanding when describing more conceptual aspects of authority, responsibility and the nature of the role.

Overall this research is undertaken within a combination of both views, although on a single continuum it is nearer to, but not focussed on, subjective/nominalist rather than objective/realist. This is because I believe that each person brings their own perceptions and experiences to the interpretation of a social situation. The literature that underpins the main aims of this research is clear in its view that there is little clarity of understanding with regards to the nature of the higher education

administrator role (McInnis, 1998; Dobson and Conway, 2003; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004). This may well be a result of multiple interpretations or perceptions held of words used to describe the role whereby each actor brings their own perceptions to bear in conflicting ways. It may also be because no specific words have ever been used consistently to describe the role and therefore it is confusion rather than personal interpretation that is causing the believed lack of clarity. As part of the design process, it may be appropriate to include some analysis of whether the same words are being used frequently, by different people, to apparently mean the same thing in relation to the role, or whether many different vocabularies emerge. Whereas where there is an attempt to discover and describe specific facts and common understandings that explain the nature of university administrators, then the realist view would be uppermost, whereby it is accepted that knowledge and understanding can have a meaning that is independent of individual perception and experience.

However, it is not clear from the literature to what extent the senior administrator roles are the result of personal influence over organizational power and control structures. Hogan (2005) identifies the impact of organizational change on the role of the administrator and as such gives weight to the impression that there may be quite considerable constraints on how far the individual can influence the role's definition within a higher education institution.

This opens up further options for considering a range of research strategies available within the subjective/nominalist paradigm and the range of appropriate methodologies and data gathering methods are considered in the next section.

Research strategy

The epistemological context of the subjective/objective split is that the nature of knowledge being sought within each framework requires either an interpretive or normative approach to the research strategy (Cohen *et al*, 2003). The interpretive paradigm governs investigations which endeavour to identify and understand the many interpretations held by people of or within a given context. Consequently this type of investigation is often undertaken using qualitative methods. On the other hand, research within the normative paradigm considers that all behaviour follows set rules and that as such should be investigated using traditional scientific, normally quantitative methods.

Having established that this research is being undertaken within the wider subjective/nominalist framework of a knowledge-for-action project, and that the prime focus will be develop an understanding of people's own perceptions of issues surrounding the role of the academic unit senior administrator in higher education, it is necessary to establish a research strategy within the interpretive paradigm so that appropriate methods to be employed can be identified that will enable the collection of relevant data for analysis. The research methods, data collection and data analysis will be considered in subsequent sections of this chapter. However, in this section consideration is given to the research strategies appropriate to the frameworks within which this research is being undertaken.

There are many research strategies that can be employed in order to provide a framework from which to formulate an appropriate methodology for investigating the chosen topic. The main focus for determining strategy is whether or not the intention

is to rely on objectivity, analysis and structure, or whether it is to emphasize subjectivity, description and agency. Three types of research design are described by Robson (2003) as being either fixed, flexible or a combination of these two. The fixed type of research design relies on a tightly pre-defined methodology that is finalised before the data collection stage, and normally focuses on quantitative data. The flexible type supports frequent reviews of the methods being used for data collection and permits the introduction of new methods in response to preliminary findings and responses obtained from the respondents usually from qualitative data. A combined approach may use an initial flexible design for exploratory purposes, with a fixed design emerging from these early findings for the main body of research.

As the focus is on perceptions of and held by people, it is important that the strategy will allow for the collection of data relating to these perceptions in a way that will enable the research questions to be answered and to deliver information appropriate to the aim of informing the definition process and professional development of departmental administrators.

Flexible design is an approach identified by Robson (2002) that enables the social researcher to devise a strategy that will enable the collection of qualitative data in ways that respond to the needs of the research as it progresses, through the utilization of rigorous data collection techniques, analysis and report writing. In this case, the main concern is with understanding people's views of how things happen and what their perceptions are of specific issues in particular institutions. However, I am also conscious of the possibility of earlier stages of the data gathering influencing the later ones by allowing issues or themes to emerge that would then progressively influence

the structure, content and focus of future interviews and other data gathering activity. Overall, this approach will enable the development of data gathering methods in response to the needs of the research, and provide a more complete set of data for analysis. Details of how this flexibility worked in practice are given in the next chapter, Findings and Data Analysis.

Considering the publications underpinning, and on which this research builds, the most commonly used strategy is to contact suitable respondents directly (either in person, or by distance) and ask that they provide information about how they perceive certain issues, or to undertake a documentary analysis of existing data complemented by personal opinions.

The idea of a flexible approach would seem to suit this research aim to obtain a range of data regarding the perceptions held of the role of senior administrators in academic units, and would appear to be an appropriate strategy for this research. Having identified a strategy, it is necessary to identify appropriate methods and techniques as discussed in the next section.

Research methodology

The methodological issues connected with a social survey strategy involve consideration of the actual data desired, from whom it is to be collected and the strategy providing the framework within which this happens.

The data desired has already been described as being the personal opinions from people who have some knowledge of the subject being investigated, senior

administrators in academic departments in UK universities, and information relating to the definition of the role. A number of decisions need to be made about whom to approach. It is desirable that rich data be obtained that will give a good picture of what is happening and how that could then have wider implications or be relatable to other situations. A case study methodology (Denscombe, 2003) should support this as it gives the opportunity for in depth analysis of a single instance using multiple sources and methods of investigation. Furthermore, it is possible to compare and contrast data obtained from one or more case studies to provide a broader range of perceptions held. This can increase the validity of the findings by considering how different groups of people respond to the same questions, and how different data sources generate information in response to the concepts being researched.

It is important to select appropriate cases for study, and the most common justification is that they are typical and similar to others. It would also be possible to select a case that is extreme, or even because it demonstrates something that is considered to be least likely to happen in typical circumstances. However, for the purposes of this study, choosing ones that appear to be typical (in that they have an academic unit structure, which may be Faculties, Schools or Departments, with senior administrators responsible for the administrative support within the unit) will give outcomes that may be relatable to more situations within the purpose and scope of this research. Most UK universities describe their structure on their institutional websites making this a relatively straightforward decision process. Although the fine details of post structures and specific responsibilities are likely to be different in each institution, the flexible research strategy is appropriate as it will enable different approaches to data gathering to maximise the potential for the collection of rich data. I will return to the

process of selection of the case study institution in the Research Management section of this chapter.

Research methods

Research methods are the means or instruments (Cohen *et al*, 2003) by which the data are actually collected. This is a two stage process which requires that the most appropriate instrument be identified and then designed in order to elicit the sort of data required that focuses on the main aim of the research. Issues surrounding the ethical, legal and professional conduct aspects of using the instruments chosen will be addressed in the Research Management section below, as will the importance of considering data analysis when selecting the different methods of data collection. Within the case study methodology a wide range methods can be used which include observations, interviews, document collection, and questionnaires. A brief outline of the benefits and limitations of each of these methods within this research follows, concluding with an overall summary of the methods chosen.

Observations

By taking an eye-witness approach and observing the object of the research it is possible to record data that do not rely on what the respondents say about their situation (Denscombe, 2003). For certain situations this can be an invaluable way of obtaining data as it enables the researcher to watch what is happening within the natural context of their research. The data recording methods can include audio and video recordings for later interpretation, field notes, and coded record sheets that use a predetermined outline of the activities and/or responses being investigated.

This method is suitable for occasions where the nature of data being sought relate to overt behaviour which can be recorded and measured and which directly addresses the focus of the research questions. It should be possible for the researcher to see what is happening, with few issues relating to the ability to decipher any of the actions before categorising them. It should also be possible to cover most of the occasions during which the identified behaviour occurs with little impact from the environment in which it is taking place.

For the purposes of this research this would appear to be an inappropriate method of data collection as the aim is to record perceptions about how things have been defined, interpreted and implemented, rather than about what behaviours are displayed at certain times.

Interviews

There are three main alternative methods of interviewing which are fully structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and are always used with the consent of the respondent (Denscombe, 2003). Each type is used in circumstances determined by the level of freedom and breadth of response required by the researcher and may be one-to-one or group interviews. The fully structured interviews offers the least freedom through the use of tightly controlled questions that are very focussed on the topic being discussed.

The fully structured interview ensures that each respondent is asked the same questions in the same order and is very similar to a questionnaire although it does allow more open responses. This method does not support well any changing of the

order or wording of questions to aid the flow of the interview, and may not support readily the development of points raised by the respondent.

The semi-structured interview still has a clear list of questions and issues to be addressed, but there is flexibility to alter the order in which they are discussed so that there is a smoother flow to the conversation, and points raised by the respondent can be investigated more fully should the researcher wish. There is the opportunity for the development of ideas and a greater breadth of response to the main questions being asked.

The unstructured interview, on the other hand, has very open-ended questions based on the main object or theme of the research and the respondent(s) is/are asked to talk freely about that. Whilst this could provide a very rich source of data regarding perceptions held, it can be very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the interview focussed directly on the key research questions. It is also likely that it would be a very long interview with highly complex data for analysis and interpretation, and may even provide very little data that were of use to the research.

For this research there is a very clearly defined set of main research questions that do not readily lend themselves to an unstructured interview approach. It is important that the data collected focus on the purpose of the research and there would be no guarantee of what topics the respondents would cover if they were just asked to 'talk about' the senior administrator role. It may even lead to confusion as to the purpose of the interview and reluctance to continue to take part. Consequently, the preference would be either structured or semi-structured interviews as these would both provide the opportunity for maintaining the focus. However, one of the main aims is to

discover how wide is the range of perceptions held about the senior administrator role and a fully structured interview would leave less room for the interviewee to expand on their views and provide rich data for subsequent analysis. Consequently, the semi-structured interview would appear to meet the aims of the research more effectively than either of the other two types.

Document collection

Denscombe (2003) argues that ‘documents can be treated as a source of *data in their own right*’ (p212, original italics) and notes that educational research primarily uses written documents as a very useful source of data, although pictures, music and other artefacts can also be utilised in this way. He classifies documents under the following headings: books and journals, web pages and the intranet, government publications and official statistics, letters and memos, records, and diaries. Ironically many of the documents relating to role creation and implementation have been created because of the very changes in higher education management and accountability that have given rise to the need for the senior administrator role in the first place. This means that minutes of meetings, personnel documents and strategic business plans are used to record decisions made about a new role, the process by which it has been approved and how its implementation is envisaged.

Denscombe (2003) identifies two main advantages for using this type of documentation in educational research:

- they were created to record accurately what took place and why;
- they are normally publicly available, or at least readily available within an institution with appropriate authorisation as part of the research planning.

However, he also recognises a couple of areas where caution is advised:

- the records are often selective in what is recorded with aspects of meeting discussions being ‘off the record’;
- there may be a particular interpretation placed on the events described dependent upon the original purpose of the record.

Another type of document identified above is a research diary. This enables the collection of a different type of personal reflection that can add value to the outcomes of the research in relation to the personal and professional development aspects of the research questions. Appropriate respondents can be identified within a case study institution and can be asked to keep a research diary that is structured in the same way as the research questions that support the main aim of the investigation. This can be particularly useful to obtain data that would provide a personal insight into the perceptions held by the respondent and observed in others, either by an experienced senior administrator or by someone implementing a newly created post.

For this research, and taking advantage of the chosen flexible design, there will be many documents that could be used to corroborate information provided during the interviews, provide the institutional or academic unit viewpoint of the nature and responsibilities of the post, and add another personal perceptual view of the role.

Consequently the inclusion of this method of data collection is welcomed as a way of broadening the information on which to base the analysis, subject to the development of an appropriate and effective data analysis process that will be addressed later in the Analysing Data section of this chapter.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are normally used when the research requires responses from a large number of people who also may be geographically widely spread making interviewing a very difficult task. When well designed, questionnaires can be effective for obtaining standardised data, although there is less chance of obtaining very rich data as issues cannot be followed through as they can in an interview with open-ended questions. There are some other limitations as well that include the respondents' abilities to interpret each question in the way it was intended that they would, there can be an apathy on the part of the respondent towards completion so that the response rate can be very low, and the time needed to create, distribute, chase up responses, and receive back the completed forms can be very great.

This research depends on rich data from a small number of respondents and as such the use of a questionnaire would be inappropriate.

Summary of methods chosen

Of the four methods identified by Denscombe (2003) as being appropriate to case study research I have been able to discount two as not meeting the criteria that the data obtained must be relevant to the aims of the research. It will be impossible to observe the processes by which the Senior Administrator role has been defined historically and what perceptions are held of the role within the academic unit, so the observation method is excluded. As the decision has been made to undertake an in-depth investigation with a few people in order to obtain data relating to as wide a range of opinions as possible, the use of questionnaires is also inappropriate.

Individual interviews will provide the best opportunity to record rich data relating to the respondents' perceptions of the questions asked. As there is a need to remain as focussed as possible the semi-structured approach is the most relevant. Group interviews were rejected as the respondents were few in number in the first case study institution and this technique would not provide the most effective environment for the identification of individual personal views.

In order to provide a richer base from which to undertake the analysis and generation of findings and conclusions, and subject to a clearly defined justification for inclusion, document collection will give an additional and important stratum of data for inclusion in this investigation.

In the next section of this chapter I consider the overall management of my research and my position in it, how the practicalities of selecting the case study institutions were dealt with, undertaking the interviews and selecting the documents for collection, and look ahead to how the data obtained might be analysed effectively to provide answers to the main research questions posed.

Research management

In this section I will address the issues of my position in this research, the selection of the case study institution and access, who will be interviewed and which documents collected, and the legal and ethical aspects of undertaking educational research.

My position in this research

As a senior administrator myself, and the researcher for this investigation, my role is key to the success of the project. Whilst my experiences have been valuable in identifying an area for study, I will need to be aware of the tendency to include preconceptions into either my questioning and/or my analysis of the data.

The academic literature on the definition of these roles is fairly sparse, and those scholars who have undertaken studies comment that further work is urgently needed. In this case my own career and current role may lead me to make assumptions about the roles being described in other institutions. I will need to keep very focused on my research questions in order to provide the most valid and reliable data possible.

Whilst it is my own personal interest in how these roles are defined that was the initial inspiration for this research, I need to make sure that I do not present a one sided view by giving more weight to the administrators' own perceptions than to the middle and senior managers who will also contribute. This was one of the reasons why I decided on a stratified sample so that I would have a broad spread of respondents from different levels of the university hierarchy (senior managers, heads of academic units, post holders) as described in the main research questions set out at the beginning of this chapter. I also decided to have similar numbers of respondents from each group, again to try to ensure a balanced range of data for analysis.

Having worked for over 10 years in higher education I am familiar with many of the protocols and politics of educational research in these settings. I have experience of

working as a university staff governor as well as undertaking project work for senior managers. This has given me the confidence to approach my chosen institutions for permission to undertake my case study there.

Research sample and access

In order to undertake an institutional case study it is important to identify somewhere that would effectively represent the role being investigated in a context that it would be possible to negotiate access to. Having limited time available to undertake the interviews gave the first parameter for selecting a university to approach, it must be within reasonable travelling distance from home or work. This then presented five institutions to consider in respect of their organisational structures and whether they embraced the role of senior administrators in academic units. Using the internet to access this information, it was possible to identify similar structures in each institution; however, two had simpler hierarchies than the other three. The perception was that the simpler the structure, the easier it would be to contact appropriate people to be involved in my research. Consequently I considered both institutions' structures very carefully and selected the one that employed the simplest management and administrative structure with the fewest academic units overall and with the easiest visiting arrangements. Each of the universities considered had fairly similar numbers of undergraduate students, although their levels of research and commercial activity varied enormously; however, this was not considered to be of consequence to the research as it was looking specifically at administration in academic units, had the investigation been focussing on central senior administrative roles this might have had a greater impact on the decision process as the nature of the roles may well have differences due to the nature of the organisational business.

Consequently I decided that I would approach a post-1992 university with a clearly defined organisational structure and contacted the Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor to request approval to undertake a case study there. Permission in principle to undertake the case study was obtained in advance of finalizing the key research questions, as non-approval would have required an approach to another institution and may have influenced the way the questions were constructed in light of the prevailing organisational structure. A statement of research aims and key research questions was sent to the institution as soon as they were available for information, receiving very positive feedback and confirmation that I could proceed with the case-study.

Having identified the university at which I would undertake the case study research, it was necessary to identify the people to approach as prospective interviewees. The literature review had enabled me to develop conceptual frameworks that identified particular levels of staff that should be able to contribute well to my research. These were people who represented the institutional view, the head of academic unit view and those people undertaking the role on a day-to-day basis. It was then necessary to identify positions, names and contact details for appropriate individuals who may be willing to take part. Having a personal knowledge of university structures and administrative processes, it was possible to identify three institutional senior managers who each had a direct involvement with senior administrators in academic units. I then went on to identify three heads of academic units who represented three distinctly different disciplines across the university in order to obtain as wide a range of views as possible. I then selected four senior administrators from those listed, two undertaking roles at the same level in one unit, but having different and distinct areas

of responsibility and then two others each from different units, but representing the two areas of responsibility identified in the first unit. There was no attempt to undertake mini-case studies by interviewing specific people who were directly linked to each other in any way.

I then telephoned each person to introduce myself and my research and ask whether they would be prepared to share their perceptions with me in an interview of around one hour duration. The response was overwhelmingly positive and none of the initial contacts refused to be involved in principle. It was agreed that they would be sent a statement of my research aims and key research questions so that they could make a fully informed final decision, which they all did very quickly after receiving the information. Each one was then telephoned again to discuss their understanding of the research aims and questions, and make arrangements to meet to undertake the interviews which were to be recorded for later transcription. They were also asked to provide a copy of the senior administrator's job descriptions to provide additional data relating to the responsibilities of the post holders. The legal and ethical aspects of undertaking these interviews are addressed in the next section of this chapter.

The flexible design chosen for this research enabled a significant development to be achieved during the investigation, with regards to the inclusion of a second case study institution. This was chosen because one of its academic units had just created a new senior administrator role that was being recruited to and implemented for the first time and I was fortunate to be appointed to this post during the initial case study data collection stage of the research project. I considered that it would be interesting to investigate how far the role was similar to and different from the findings from the

initial case-study. Coincidentally this second case study institution had a very similar structure to the first site, although this time it was a pre-1992 university, and was also one of the original group of five potential case study sites I had reviewed for my research.

In order to undertake research at this institution I obtained approval from the head of the relevant academic unit through submitting a written research proposal. Again the response I received was very positive and written permission was provided. The academic unit managers were all advised that I would be undertaking this research and again were very supportive. Owing to the lack of time available to me to interview my new colleagues within the early stages of role development and implementation and within the timescale of this investigation, I made the decision to focus on document collection at this second institution and consequently, as I was not interviewing any colleagues I did not require further agreements for my research within the unit. The documents were to be only those readily available to staff within the unit, and it was decided to maintain this approach and not attempt to gain access to any other confidential letters, emails and memos that may have existed to support the creation of the role. The job description formed the basis of this document collection and added to this was the document outlining the skills and responsibility analysis undertaken by the institution's Human Resources department when establishing the grade of the post and which had accompanied the application for approval of the post by the institution's senior management. There was a new five year strategic plan that had identified the need for a senior administrator role and contributed to its definition that was also included in the collection. The only way I could record my own perceptions of implementing the role and observed opinions of

colleagues was for me to keep a personal research diary of my perceptions of the role, and how the post holder was received by colleagues. This would then provide useful data relating to activities undertaken and as a document it was readily available for analysis and within the stated scope of document collection as a means of data collection previously outlined. To supplement this personal record was the original presentation given as part of the selection interview during which I was required to address my personal interpretation of the role as described in the job description. The final document selected was the probation review undertaken after six months in post that reviewed the effectiveness of the role as perceived by the post holder's supervisor who was also one of the unit's managers. The nature and implications of the actual documents selected will be addressed later in this chapter

Legal and ethical aspects of undertaking educational research

This investigation is being undertaken with full approval from the Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor and the informed consent of those being interviewed at the first case study institution and the Head of Academic Unit at the second. Likewise the collection of documentary data was approved in principle in advance of the start of the project. Also, in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2004), all interviewees would be given the opportunity to amend or withdraw part or all of their interview transcript should they wish. As the nature of this research was not personally focused there were no implications for potentially harming those involved and it was consequently not necessary to give any other specific consideration of sensitivity issues apart from confidentiality and anonymity in the final report. All interview subjects would be provided with a copy of the Executive Summary of the final thesis, as would an

appropriate staff development representative of the AUA, whose comments on the findings presented will be referred to and commented on in the Conclusions and Recommendations chapter of this thesis.

All data recordings (voice and text) were stored without names, using unique numbers as identifiers for analysis purposes. As no personal data were to be retained on an electronic data base, or in hard copy, there were no implications under the Data Protection Act 1998 for the data collection, analysis or thesis preparation.

Triangulation

Denscombe (2003) comments on the benefits to research of obtaining data on the same topic from different sources, a process often referred to as triangulation. This is considered to improve the quality of the data used for analysis as it will present issues from different perspectives and for certain finding to be corroborated.

In this research the case study findings will be triangulated (Cohen *et al*, 2003) within themselves by involving respondents from different levels of the organizational hierarchy, and through the data obtained from the document collection. During the interviews at the first case study institution the respondents frequently mentioned the importance of their job descriptions and offered me copies of them to assist with my research. As the flexible research design supported the addition of other data collection techniques, I decided that they could be useful as a means of enabling an analysis of how far they supported the respondents' comments relating to their duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, it suggested that other documents would be useful for the same purpose of corroboration and comparison and consequently appropriate

ones were identified during the research process (full details of what was selected and their limitations will be given in the next chapter, Findings and Data Analysis). A number of potential users of the recommendations will also be contacted for their views and comments from them are included in the final chapter of this thesis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), again to ensure the verification of the findings.

Reliability, validity and authenticity

Denscombe (2003) considers that a greater level of reliability is obtained when the data obtained using a particular research method remains the same if that method is repeated. In that instance, if different results were to be obtained it could be considered that this variation would be due entirely to changes in the issues being researched (ie institutional changes could change the perceptions held about some aspects of the role of the senior administrator). For this investigation the reliability should be quite high in that were the research instruments to be used again in exactly the same context they would be very likely to elicit the same outputs relating to perceptions held. However, because of the very nature of the objects being researched, changes in the data would be inevitable at later dates as processes and procedures in university administration can change very quickly. So, if a different researcher undertook the data collection at a later date, the context of the senior administrator role may have changed due the nature of the work then being undertaken by the institution and people's perceptions change over time and so the results may be different.

However, the methodology and research instruments could easily be used again with other institutions and groups of university administrators, in this country or overseas.

In fact this would be most desirable as it would continue to address the lack of research in this area. I would not anticipate them being of any use to investigate other matters pertaining to university administration without some modification.

The validity (Denscombe, 2003) of the research and data obtained relates to how far the data reflect the truth, or reality, of the situation being investigated. Also where the data are directly relevant to the research questions, the validity will be strengthened by clearly stating the research aim and focus and devising instruments that adequately reflect this. It is not possible to avoid researcher bias entirely, although every attempt is made to do so as far as possible by keeping the focus strong and consistent and acknowledging areas where bias may have had an influence. Furthermore, by clearly stating the researcher's position in the research throughout, and identifying any areas where personal experiences and beliefs might have had a stronger influence than others (see the section above, *My Position in this Research*), it is hoped to obtain and analyse data that are as valid as is reasonable and seen to be an honest portrayal of the data collection and findings.

Authenticity, whereby the data and research findings are seen to be reasonable within the context of the research being undertaken, is supported by building on existing scholarly work, obtaining feedback during the whole process from my interviewees, doctoral supervisor, potential users of the recommendations, fellow students and colleagues, providing information for institutions and the professional body to use to inform role definition processes and professional development programmes, and establishing areas for further investigation based on the findings of the study.

Analysing data

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe a concept whereby qualitative data should provide "... rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts." (p1) and that such data should "... help researchers to get beyond initial conceptions and to generate or revise conceptual frameworks." (p1). In order for such data to be interpreted by the researcher they need to be presented and analysed in a structured and effective way. In order to do this Miles and Huberman (1994) identified a number of stages of analysis that should focus on the key issues and themes identified during the research process, include feedback from stakeholders and mindful of the methods of dissemination of the findings:

- data reduction – selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, transforming the data that appear, and finally identifying key issues;
- data display – an organised, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action with key issues grouped into underlying themes;
- conclusions and verification – based on underlying data reduction and display, accurately reflecting the views expressed by the respondents (including their feedback on the conclusions drawn), and resulting in findings based on appropriate analysis and focused on the research questions being asked and within identified conceptual frameworks, further supported by feedback from potential ‘users’ of the research.

For this investigation there were two distinct sources of data that needed to be analysed; interview transcripts and document content. It was important that each type was analysed in ways that were compatible with each other and contributed to

developing an understanding of how this research would provide answers to the original research questions.

The raw interview data was in the form of recorded interviews that were then transcribed personally and produced in a number of printed copies. Miles and Huberman's (1994) data reduction phase required that these were subsequently analysed according to a clearly defined coding system that was directly based on the aspects of the conceptual frameworks identified during the literature review.

Robson (2003) suggests using a content analysis approach for the documents where the text is analysed quantitatively using a clearly defined measure (eg number of times a word is used), whilst recognising the purpose of the document as well as the context for which it was created. However, this approach did not appear to complement that used for the interview transcripts, so the decision was made to use the same approach with the documents as for the transcripts, whereby the text was analysed and coded using the same coding system to identify issues, generate comments and identify implications arising from the data analysed. It is important to recognise the reasons why the documents were created, what they contain and what their intended use was when undertaking the analysis as there may be some limitations as to their usefulness in the context of the research. The documents used in this investigation will be submitted to this type of scrutiny and details will be given in the next chapter, Findings and Data Analysis.

The first task to enable data analysis was presenting the data in a format that could be displayed to enable understanding to emerge. In order to achieve this, three data

analysis events/activities were developed based on the concepts developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Robson (2003). As this investigation had clearly defined research questions and three conceptual frameworks within which to site the data, the analysis activities and coding structure reflected these themes. The four analysis activities were:

- Data analysis activity 1 – definitions created for each code to be used to identify areas of the texts that were relevant (the code definitions will be described within the data analysis and findings chapter of this thesis);
- Data analysis activity 2 – text of the interview transcriptions and documents collected coded according to definitions in category 1;
- Data analysis activity 3 - summaries compiled for each text;
- Data analysis activity 4 – to compile all summaries for each conceptual framework in one place.

Inevitably each of these categories needed to be undertaken in a particular order so that the maximum benefit of each stage could be obtained, so the following schedule was developed:

- Activity 1 was undertaken as part of the conceptual framework development process and influenced the design of the questions developed for the interviews and the focus of the data collection process.
- Activity 2 was planned to be undertaken after all of the interviews had been completed. This was a conscious decision so that there was less temptation to lead the interviews along particular avenues that had been developed by previous respondents. Furthermore this was also completed after the first three months in post at the second case study institution, again to endeavour to reduce the effects of bias on all aspects of the data collection.

- Activity 3 was planned for completed during the seventh and ninth months of the second case study data collection period. Again this was designed to reduce the impact of undertaking this activity on the recording of a personal research diary and interpretation of a new senior administrator role practically.
- Activity 4 was due to be completed during the ninth month of employment with the second case study institution and once the main data collection had been completed at this institution. The results of this category would then be displayed alongside the original conceptual frameworks and comparisons made as to how far the findings of this research supported or revised the frameworks that had emerged from the literature, with the aim of permitting a “... viewing of a full data set in the same location” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp91-2).

The final stage to the data analysis will be to obtain verification and feedback from potential ‘users’ of the research (including an appropriate member of the professional body (the AUA) responsible for staff development) in order to identify areas of agreement and challenge, and to consider aspects that could benefit from further research.

Summary of methodological issues

I have considered the wider framework that has focused my research as a knowledge-for-action project, within a subjective/nominalist paradigm. As I am considering the perceptions and opinions of higher educational professionals, in order to contribute to the understanding of the definition of the role of senior administrators in academic units in UK universities, I have selected a social survey research design, using a case

study methodology with interviews and document collection as my methods of data gathering. My personal position within the research has been discussed earlier in this chapter, and is a positive aspect of this research as it is enabling me to have a good understanding of the context of the role I am investigating and associated administrative processes, although I do recognise the areas where it may be more intrusive and potentially damaging to the quality of data obtained or analysis produced. I have outlined the process for identifying the research samples of all the interviewees and relevant documents and obtaining access to both. Triangulation of data is being obtained through the complementary activities of interviews and documentary analysis, and the ethical and legal issues associated with this research have been commented on. I believe that this research has a good level of authenticity as the research aims are firmly based on existing published work and discussed with members of the EdD course team, fellow students and professional colleagues. The data analysis techniques have been outlined and support the decision to use the data collection methods of interviews and documents.

The next chapter focuses on the presentation of the findings and reflects on the data gathering processes, the effectiveness for obtaining rich data relevant to my enquiry, and the overall efficiency of the research design and execution. Each of the conceptual frameworks is handled separately and each axis analysed independently in order to ascertain how far the research findings support or challenge the conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature review.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the data collected for this research and includes sections on the processes of collection and analysis, the presentation of the data and the findings from the analysis.

Firstly consideration is given to the operational aspects of undertaking this research including the data collection instruments used, how effective they were and what limitations they had. The data analysis process is then outlined and its effectiveness compared with what was planned and what limitations were identified. The nature of the data collected is reviewed for its match with the conceptual frameworks identified from the literature review, its quality and validity, and its effectiveness and limitations for analysis.

Then the data are presented and discussed in relation to each of the conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature review. This gives the opportunity to reflect on the quality and limitations of the findings in each conceptual area. Each of these three sections concludes with a review of the framework in the light of the findings.

The chapter ends with a brief summary of the findings and considers how they provide insights to the main three research questions.

Data gathering process

The nature of the research data sought and selection of the data collection instruments and methods have been discussed in the previous chapter, so only the implementation aspects of these are considered here. Consideration is given to the following:

- using semi-structured interviews;
- undertaking document collection;
- the effectiveness of these methods of data collection;
- the quality of the data collected.

Instruments and methods used

In the previous chapter the decisions to use semi-structured interviews and document collection as the data gathering tools for this research were outlined in some detail.

They were chosen as methods that would maximise the opportunities to collect relevant and rich data both from case-study respondents and documents that were either referred to during the interviews or that would provide an insight into the definition and responsibilities of the senior administrator role.

Semi-structured interviews

By using semi-structured interviews I expected to be able to obtain in-depth insights in response to questions designed to address and remain focused on the issues raised by my key research questions. In creating the questions to be used during the interview it was important that the main focus of the research questions was incorporated and the questions were sufficiently open to allow the respondents to offer their own opinions without being led or constrained. As my research questions were very specific, I decided to pilot them as the ones for the interview. This piloting

followed a number of stages, starting with discussion with my research supervisor, with colleagues on the EdD programme who did not all work in higher education and who queried specific meanings and contexts, and an academic colleague who was quite independent of my research. In addition to this the questions were discussed with each of the respondents in order to establish the meaning of phrases where they were uncertain in any way. This final stage did not result in any changes in wording, the only requirement being definitions of academic unit and senior administrator in the context of the research and the respondents' institution.

The questions were sent to the respondents in advance of the meeting so that they were able to undertake some thought and preparation beforehand if they wished and to ensure that the respondents did not feel in any way uncomfortable with the questions on the day. Furthermore, I was able to provide any additional explanations requested by the respondents as the interviews progressed. The issues relating to sample selection, access and ethics were addressed in the preceding chapter.

Each interview was booked in advance and confirmed a few days before it was due to take place. They all took place in the respective respondents' offices at the case study institution and were audio-recorded for later full transcription by myself. None of the interviewees appeared to distrust me in any way and they each talked freely for up to an hour on the issues they thought were important in relation to the questions posed. Brief field notes taken at the time show that they were all keen to talk about the issues I wanted to discuss and considered it a good opportunity to reflect themselves on what their thoughts were and how the roles were developing.

The quality of the data obtained from these interviews is generally well focussed on the research questions. Furthermore it appears to be clear in its meaning as there are a number of instances in most of the interviews where the respondents provide self-corroboration by including additional material on a subject already discussed.

However, it is noticeable that one or two of the respondents took the opportunity to expand on some areas that were not directly relevant, and there is some question over whether a more directive style of interviewing could have brought them back on track and elicited more data on the main research areas. Overall, I believe that the data obtained through these semi-structured interviews are relevant to the aims of the research and in sufficient quantity to enable a thorough analysis to support a valid demonstration of findings against the initial aims of the research, the main research questions and the conceptual frameworks.

Document collection

The use of document collection as a data gathering method was identified during the interviews. A number of the respondents provided copies of job descriptions when I arrived as a means of providing me with more information, job descriptions were also referred to by every respondent during the interview. As a result of this I decided to incorporate them into the research design as a means of corroborating the data gathered through the interviews.

This was then extended to the second case-study which included documents and a research diary relating to the implementation of the new senior administrator role in the second case study institution as discussed in the preceding chapter. My own role in higher education administration made me well placed to understand the benefits

and limitations of the type of records available to me for my research. Minutes of meetings would permit me to ascertain the process by which the role was identified and created, personnel documentation including the job description and vacancy advertisement would show where the role responsibilities lay, and the academic unit strategic business plan would enable me to get an oversight of how the role was seen to be integral to the work of the unit. I decided I was unlikely to be able to access letters and memos used in the process of creating the role as these were more likely to be considered confidential and access would be restricted to me as post holder on grounds of professional sensitivity and etiquette.

In order to support this I decided to keep a personal research diary of my experiences of taking up the role and interacting with colleagues within the university and academic unit in which I am based. Both Robson (2003) and Denscombe (2003) comment on the usefulness of this source of documentary data in providing a retrospective account of certain events. The main advantage of this type of research method is that it can provide a rich source of data when well constructed and focussed on the research aims. However, there are also issues relating to misreporting as a result of the diarist being aware of their involvement in the research and recording events that are either believed to be what the researcher wants to see or which show the diarist in a good light. Denscombe (2003) argues that they are very useful as a 'version of things as seen by the writer' (p216) whereas Robson (2003) favours the use of diaries as a precursor to interviews, or direct observation, to provide richer data.

In response to these comments, I decided to delay the analysis of the data from the first case study until after I had completed six months in my new senior administrator role and maintained my diary for that time. By doing this I hoped to avoid my diary entries being too influenced by what the interviewees perceived at their institution. Clearly I would have retained some views just from undertaking the interviews and doing the transcriptions, but I believe that this approach helped to make my personal account more individual to me and less connected with the interviews. This was largely successful; however, with hindsight I would have found the data analysis easier if I had actually structured my diary comments on the questions I had asked at the interviews rather than recording free-text opinions and observations.

Also, the use of other documents from the institution enabled some corroboration with the research diary. These additional documents were identified at the time of recruitment to the post and were copies of the following: job description, interview presentation, Human Resources documents relating to the approval of the post, the academic unit's five year strategic plan, and my six month probationary interview report. I was unable to find any minutes of meetings where discussions had been recorded regarding the purpose of creating this role, only minutes to confirm that someone had been appointed. This was due to the institution's current policy and practice for the development of administrative posts whereby there is no requirement for them to be discussed at the main committees. Consequently, I did not include any meeting documents in the data collected for analysis.

Overall the aim was for these documents to provide another view of the role, how it was described (for both case studies), how the role was perceived within the academic

unit and what the intended responsibilities were. However, as each of the documents was created for a specific purpose, it is important to ensure that these purposes are acknowledged during the data analysis (Denscombe, 2003) in order to present the data as accurately as possible.

Job descriptions and role analysis statements are created for three main purposes: 1) to inform the role approval and grading process by Human Resources departments, 2) as advertising tools used during the recruitment and selection process and 3) as job outlines for the post holder. Clearly they will be created with these purposes in mind and will provide a general overview of the role rather than a detailed account of its responsibilities, how it came about, its duties and expected interaction with colleagues. However, in the context of this research they are seen to be very important by the interviewees and all the post holders remarked on their usefulness in defining how they developed their role operationally. Consequently, I believe them to be a relevant and very useful data source for corroborative and illustrative purposes. Furthermore, the probationary review process of the second case study was based on the information held in the job description, so it is necessary for both documents to be included as they are mutually informative. Likewise, the recruitment presentation document was based solely on the job description provided by the second case study institution, so it is necessary to include both documents to make the data obtained meaningful.

The decision to include the second case study Five Year Strategic Plan was made because it refers to the creation and development of the senior administrator role throughout. Clearly this is an internal document and requires the reader to have some

prior understanding of the context and meaning of the assumptions made. As an experienced administrator and also a member of the unit working to implement this plan I believe that I am well placed to use it within this research. However, I am also aware that my reading of it could be biased towards my own perceptions, so the decision to subject it to the same coded analysis as the interview transcripts was designed to limit this as much as reasonably possible.

Of all the documents used for this research, the research diary of the second case-study is the most subjective as it was created personally by the researcher.

Consequently its data will be used with care and always corroboratively with other more independent data.

Generally the data obtained from the document collection are relevant to the enquiry and provide corroborative and comparative data when analysed with that obtained from the interview transcripts. In the same way as for the interviews, these documents were selected for their relevance to the research aims and as such improve the quality of the data obtained. However, it is also recognised that all documents are produced for purposes other than this particular research, so caution and care need to be applied during the analysis process to uphold their inherent validity and usefulness.

Data analysis process

Introduction

This section considers the process used for analysing the data collected, and the effectiveness and limitations of the process chosen.

Using the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach of data collection and reduction the analysis activity pattern outlined in the preceding chapter was used for all of the analysis, both the interviews and documents collected. For this investigation it comprises four main activities:

- creating a coding structure;
- presenting the data and coding them manually;
- creating coded text summaries for each data source;
- compiling a summary of the data by source for each axis of the conceptual framework and model outcomes.

Each one of these activities is now considered separately so that the effectiveness and limitations of each phase can be considered in context.

Coding structure

In order to be able to reduce the data collected to a format that would enable an effective analysis to be undertaken a coding structure was required. It was important that these codes accurately reflected the main research questions and the conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature review. Consequently I decided that the coding would be based directly on the conceptual frameworks, with each of the axes forming one code:

Research question 1

- Central institutional influence on the role definition;
- Head of academic unit influence on the role definition;
- Post holder influence on the role definition;

Research question 2

- Clarity of definition of role;
- Breadth and range of responsibilities assigned;
- Likelihood of post holder undertaking responsibilities previously held by academic staff;

Research question 3

- Perceived professionalisation of the role;
- Perceived importance of the role in the work of the academic unit;
- Level of post holder collaboration with academic colleagues.

This gave a total of nine codes to use which appeared to be a realistic proposition as they each had a very clear meaning (see Figure 1 below) and would be relatively easy to assign text to from the interview transcripts and documents collected.

Figure 1
Data coding structure

Code	Description/axis of framework
1a cent	Central influence on role definition
1b head	Head of academic unit influence on role definition
1c post	Post holder influence on role definition
2a clarity	Clarity of definition of role
2b range	Breadth and range of responsibilities assigned
2c academic	Undertaking responsibilities that were previously academic ones
3a prof	Perceived professionalisation of the role
3b import	Perceived importance of the role in the work of the academic unit
3c collab	Collaboration and development of effective working relationships with academic colleagues

By using these codes I hoped to identify the data that were directly relevant to the research and which would challenge or support the frameworks once analysed by presenting the views held by the respondents and within the documents reviewed.

In practice these codes worked very well. They were easy to remember when close reading the text and sufficiently succinct to enable the selection of only directly relevant text. I did have some concerns that they might not provide enough detail to support the analysis, but these proved to be unfounded as the interview transcripts and documents demonstrated themes and groups of ideas that were either directly relevant or not. If there had been more codes to assign the whole process may well have become too complex to execute efficiently and there may have been a resultant confusion of data obtained by trying to code it too tightly within a larger coding framework.

I did consider whether this approach to coding might limit the range of findings from the data as other issues may emerge during interviews and document analysis that had not previously been considered within this research. However, having already decided on a very strong focus on three main research questions and the conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature, I decided that this would not be a problem here providing that the texts were analysed carefully and all issues relating to each code identified and included in the analysis.

Data presentation and coding

For the coding to take place, the data needed to be prepared and produced in similar formats that would support this activity effectively (Denscombe, 2003).

The first stage was to transcribe all of the audio recordings of the interviews that had taken place. This I undertook personally as a means of getting to know the data as well as possible before starting the coding. Each transcript was given a unique code to identify its origin and printed on different coloured paper depending on whether the respondent was a senior manager in the institution, a head of academic unit, or a senior administrator to enable quotations to be made without any specific reference to the interviewee that could lead to identification of the actual person. These transcripts also had line numbers for each line of text to enable ease of reference back to the original data subsequently. The coding was then applied to the transcript by hand, with the relevant blocks of text being ringed and the code noted in the margin.

The documents were photocopied and where appropriate page numbers added to provide a simple referencing system for cross checking the data later on in the analysis process. The same manual coding system was applied as for the transcripts. In practice this was a relatively straightforward, although very time consuming task. The subsequent summarising activities discussed in the following section ensured that, as far as reasonably possible, all relevant data were selected and that all extraneous material excluded.

Summaries of the coded text

Having coded the data it was necessary to create summaries of each code to support a focused analysis of the data relevant to the research. It was decided that this would be effectively undertaken as part of a review of the coding to check the accuracy of that process. Each data source (transcript and document) was re-read to double check that the codes had been correctly applied and a hand-written summary created under two headings for each transcript (issues and comments) and three for the documents (issues, comments and document source implications). Appropriate reference numbers were included in the notes to enable quick access to the source data during the analysis.

These handwritten summaries were then reviewed and detailed data analysis tables created to enable observations and conclusions to be drawn from the data obtained. These tables were created for each of the conceptual frameworks with a column for each of the axes and an additional column for researcher comments and an overall summary of the data from each source. This process was also underpinned by further readings of the source data to ensure full coverage within the analysis process.

This activity further supported my developing understanding of the relevant data and also acted as a means of introducing me to the general areas of opinion that would structure the full analysis.

Summary

This section has considered the data collection and analysis processes used in this research. It has focused on the operationalisation of the research design and methods chosen, their merits and limitations and the quality of the data obtained. The next three sections present the data findings and discuss them within the context of each of the conceptual frameworks, linking back to the literature reviewed from which the frameworks emerged and including illustrations from the data analysed to support the findings presented.

As there are two phases to this research, the first case study comprising interviews and associated job description documents, and the second case study that comprises documents, the following data presentation will address both phases and then seek to establish areas of commonality and difference.

All references to the case studies are identified by C1 for the first and C2 for the second, with appropriate suffixes for the data source (either interview or document number). Each reference identifier also has an appropriate line, page or section number added to locate the quotation in the original source. The data sources are identified as:

- SM plus interview number – for institutional senior manager interviews;
- HU plus interview number – for heads of academic units interviews;
- PH plus interview number – for post holders;
- D plus identifier number – for documents.

For example C1/7 PH 93-97 is the relevant reference for case study one, interview seven with a post holder and the quotation is taken from lines 93-97, and C2/16 D 1a represents case study two, document number 16 and section 1a of the document itself.

The next section considers the influences that have been brought to bear on the definition of the role of the senior administrator in academic units and how far the institutions' senior managers, the heads of the academic units and the post holders have been able to have a say in how the role has been defined.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS FOR SENIOR ADMINISTRATOR ROLE DEFINITION (CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ONE)

Introduction

The aim of this section of the thesis is to try to find out how far the definition of the role is influenced by the central institutional senior management, by the head of the academic unit and by the post holder. The data relating to these influences on how the senior administrator role has been defined are now presented and analysed taking account of the two case study contexts. Consideration is also given to where there are similarities and differences in the findings and how these may or may not impact on the framework.

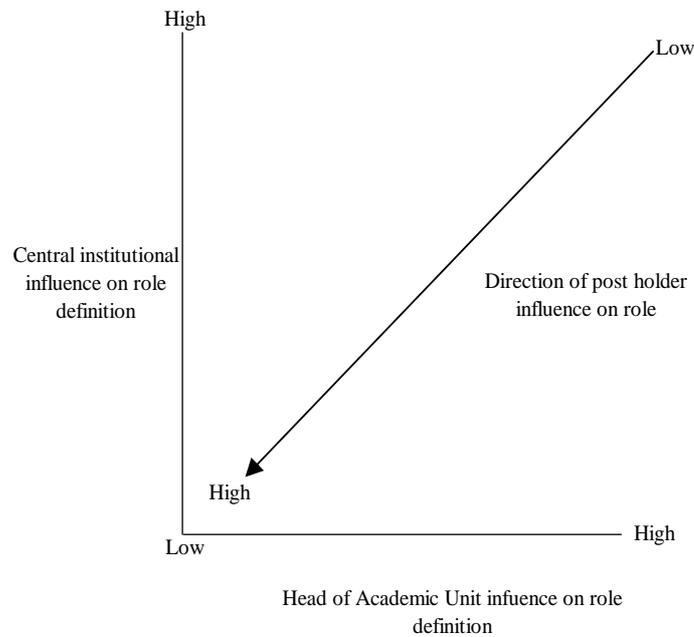
This analysis focuses on the axes of the conceptual framework (below) that emerged from the literature review and on which the research questions and data analysis coding structures were based.

Within this framework it is suggested that the post holder has less influence on the definition of the role where there are strong influences from the centre and head of the academic unit where the role is based.

Conceptual framework 1

Senior administrator role definition

Framework 1 - Direction of post holder influence on role



Initially the findings appear to offer some support for this view and, furthermore, there is some evidence to demonstrate an increasing move to control from the centre as the heads of the academic units in both case studies are members of the senior management team of the university. However, the post holder does seem to have quite significant influence over the operationalisation of the role that has been defined centrally and/or by the head of the unit and is able to develop the implementation and operationalisation of the role within its overall remit.

Presentation of findings

Central institutional influence on role definition

All of the respondents from the first case study are in agreement that the senior administrator role had been defined by the central university senior management team and disseminated to the post holders by way of the job description document. There is wide recognition that this definition has come about as a result of both recent and historically perceived issues relating to inconsistency of administrative practice across the various academic units of the institution. With the current developments in improving the student experience and realisation of the student as a consumer or customer of the university, there is an even greater awareness of the importance that each academic unit should provide an experience of similar quality and nature to the others and the heads of the units are keen to support consistency of practice.

... I don't want to be doing things differently from other parts of the university ... otherwise all you're going to get is hassle from students because they talk to other students and say why is this different. You've got to have a degree of conformity otherwise your're going to have a fairly chaotic system. (C1/4 HU 112-115)

In order to attempt to achieve these improvements in administrative processes and the interface with students, there has been a general move towards devolution of responsibility within the institution and higher education in general, with the academic units being held accountable for their budgets, administrative processes and the quality of their teaching and research. As a result the heads of the academic units have been required to take on roles that have become more and more business focussed and one way of addressing this has been to give senior administrators in the units more responsibilities (Hare and Hare, 2002). The respondents all commented

that historically this had been working well at the local level, although colleagues with apparently the same roles as senior administrators were often undertaking very different tasks from each other, and even being paid on different grades. This had resulted in some difficulties when the central administrative functions were trying to communicate with the units only to find activities being assigned to different people and undertaken in different ways with varying interpretations of requirements:

... because of the confusion of who did which role and how much of the role they did and things like that. Based on that when they were reorganising the [academic units] they took the brave decision to change all the job descriptions and reporting lines. (C1/6 HU 37-39)

Consequently the university's senior management team decided that there could be greater efficiency and effectiveness if the role of senior administrator was essentially the same in each of the units and that the post holders all reported centrally to the same institutional senior manager, with a day-to-day operational responsibility to the head of the academic unit.

Generally this development was welcomed by all those interviewed, with it being seen as a way of simplifying reporting and systems development, and supporting effective team work and sharing of best practice, with each post holder being remunerated on the same salary grade.

... the balance between central control and devolution has moved far too much into devolution, what is going on now is a kind of re-balance. (C1/1 SM 141-143)

... there's a standard job description ... and it's been put at a much higher level and will be a standard level across all [the academic units]. (C1/5 HU 48-49)

We're supposed to now have the same areas of responsibility in each [academic unit], so I'm supposed to do exactly the same job in this [unit] as [someone else] in another one. (C1/7 PH 84-85)

This view that the senior administrator role should be defined in the same way for each academic unit is interesting in the context of Becher and Kogan's (1992) views of what an academic unit is and how administrators identify with the institution rather than the unit itself. There is the expectation in this first case study that the post holders will have a dual role as they are required to report to both the institutional senior manager and the head of the academic unit. Some concern was expressed by the post holders that the heads of units may see the post holder as a "... cuckoo in the nest ..." (C1/7 PH 34) with divided loyalties as the senior administrators are being line managed by the institutional senior manager, with an additional day-to-day operational responsibility to the head of unit. However, this is generally seen to be something that people need to be aware of but that is unlikely to cause any major problems. One head of unit was pleased that the line management and associated salary costs were no longer the responsibility of that unit, but rather being met by the institution because "... they [would] have to provide me with the service ..." (C1/6 HU 62) if there was an absence or other personnel related issue with the post holder.

The documents for the first case study did not make any specific reference to the origin of the definition of the role except to state that the post holders were responsible directly to the institutional senior manager responsible for their area of work, with a day-to-day responsibility to the head of the academic unit for operational matters (C1/11-15 D).

The second case study presents a very different view of the central influence on the definition of the senior administrator role. There is no evidence from the documents that the institutional senior managers (other than by implication as the head of the academic unit is a member of the institution's senior management team) were involved in the definition of the role in any way, other than by implication to approve its creation and grading. This may, however, be a feature of the different types of investigation undertaken and the use of the same methods in the alternate institution may have elicited different results.

This would appear to be the scenario that historically existed at the first case study institution, although there is some recognition of similar roles in other academic units of the second institution:

As [the academic unit] becomes a more coherent and uniform [unit] such posts as this will be crucial. That can be seen by considering this post with the important roles played by the holders of similar posts in [another academic unit]. (C2/19 D p6)

It may be interesting to revisit the second case study in five years time to see whether there have been any moves by the institution to centrally influence the academic unit senior administrator roles or whether they are still operating on a locally defined basis to meet locally defined needs.

In summary, there is a widely held belief that there is a strong influence from the institutional senior management team in the creation of the job description, although the actual implementation of the role is undertaken at the local level.

Head of academic unit influence on role definition

All of the heads of the academic units in the first case study were involved in the definition of the senior administrator role. The relevant institutional senior managers created initial job descriptions and then circulated them to the heads for comment and discussion. Further consideration of these descriptions then took place within the wider institutional senior management team which included the heads of the academic units, and at which the final versions were approved for implementation:

... job descriptions were circulated to all [the heads of the academic units] and they had the opportunity to comment and so on ...” (C1/4 HU 99-100)

The post holders were all aware of this process having taken place and recognised that their heads of units were given the opportunity to be involved in the creation of the job description. However, they felt that the heads had far more influence at local level because they were able to:

... determine [the academic unit's] own staffing structure ... they can have whatever management structure they like built around those particular [required senior administrator] posts. So you're still not going to have a generic role because each [head] is determined that different tasks will rest in different areas. (C1/7 PH 103-107)

This concern that the generic post was likely to be impossible to achieve was expressed by each of the post holders interviewed. They were all aware that the different units would be structured slightly differently and believed that this in itself would result in their heads requiring them to undertake their responsibilities in different ways:

... my role is being focussed very much into quality and undergraduate student support. There's a new post been created ... and they will now have responsibility for admissions, international partnerships, research and all the

other stuff [I] used to do before. But it means that [the senior administrator] doesn't have the overview of all the academic support any more. Now that's not necessarily the case in another [academic unit]. (C1/7 PH 88-94)

The second case study documents demonstrate that the senior administrator role was entirely a local creation, designed to meet the perceived business needs of the unit:

The directors [of the academic unit] had identified the need for this post and requested that it be created [by the head of unit]. (C2/21 D p1)

However, it should be noted that members of the institutional senior management team in the second case study institution may have contributed to its design in an informal or indirect way as the head of the academic unit is a proactive member of that team. It is possible that discussions may have taken place at various times during the development process about the way the heads of the other individual academic units established their administrative support and this may have influenced the decisions made in this particular case.

In summary, the evidence shows that the most significant influence on the formal creation of the role, its job description and definition through local implementation, is the head of the academic unit in which it is based. The head has both a strategic involvement because of their membership of the institutional senior management team and also a strong local influence on how the role is put into practice locally.

Post holder influence on role definition

In the first case study all the institutional senior managers and heads of academic units report that the senior administrator job descriptions were created by them and not

referred to the post holders for comment. However, it is noted that discussions had taken place with some post holders before the descriptions were drawn up and the views expressed during those conversations were considered by the senior managers.

So that included a survey of all current post holders, asking them some standard questions and it included assessment of how their time was being spent ... (C1/3 SM 32-34)

However, in the eyes of the post holders this did not constitute involvement that had had any impact on the final job description. They all felt that they had had either no input to the development of the role (C1/7 PH 131), or that their input had been indirect by way of the survey (C1/9 PH 100) referred to above.

The main area of influence for the post holder on the role definition is on the implementation of the responsibilities outlined in the job descriptions and the institutional senior manager is keen that each post holder is proactively involved in this as a member of the team of senior administrators:

... we are going to get together and we are going to go through the job description, go through our own job description, everyone of us, it's going to be quite an open sort of thing. We're going to talk about our expectations ... this is where we are, this is where we think we want to be. Together we're going to build a bridge to get from here to there. (C1/1 SM 288-299)

... there would be dialogue and comment about what they should and shouldn't be doing. Which could be taking on some cross university role to give them a broader experience, which could be changing things that are done at the centre in light of things that happen in the [academic unit], it has to be a constant dialogue doesn't it. (C1/5 HU 395-398)

In the second case study the job description (C2/19 D) and research diary (C2/20 D) give examples of where the post holder works closely with the head of unit in the development of both the role itself and the administrative responsibilities undertaken.

Overall the respondents consider that the post holder's main area of influence is in the operationalisation of the responsibilities outlined in the job description, for example

... [the post holder would take] overall responsibility to ensure that the regulations are implemented both in terms of as far as individual students are concerned, course approvals, course monitoring, external examiners, all those sort of things ... (C1/4 HU 29-31)

... they are likely to be involved with helping with the implementation locally of a solution delivered across the institution and supporting that ... having them all part of one team we can have them developing themselves and developing the university's capability at the same time, for the benefit of the whole ... (C1/3 SM 132-143)

... a person in post who was thinking well how can I develop this post, so that person would then take any opportunities that came along to develop the post ... (C1/7 PH 43-45)

It is interesting to note that there is a consistent view of the necessity of the post holder developing the role in discussion with others and to the benefit of the institution as well as the academic unit in which the post is situated.

The job descriptions from the first case study institution corroborate these findings by stating the reporting lines of the post holder (directly to the appropriate institutional senior manager and also to the head of unit for day-to-day operational matters), and demonstrating that the post holder is responsible for developing their role within the context of the job description provided and within specified areas of responsibility.

The documents from the second case study illustrate a similar situation whereby the post holder is responsible for identifying their own duties within the overall remit of the job description as defined by the head of the unit. There is "... considerable

freedom to work creatively ...” (C2/19 D F2b) and as it is such a senior administrative role it is “... not closely defined or constrained.” (C2/20 D p2).

In summary, the evidence from these two case studies shows that the post holder has no direct influence on the creation of the job description for the senior administrator role; however, they do have significant influence in the way the responsibilities assigned are implemented by them.

Summary of findings

These findings presented above show three consistent themes running through them:

- that the institutional senior management team defines the senior administrator role, whether this be directly (as in the case of the first case study) or indirectly (in the second case study) when the head of the academic unit is a member of the institutional senior management team;
- that the head of the academic unit is strongly influential in the local interpretation of the role as defined in the job description;
- that the post holders’ strongest area of influence over the definition of the role is with regard to the implementation of the role at the local level and the operationalisation of the areas of responsibility outlined in the job description.

It is interesting to note that all of the job descriptions that form part of this data analysis use very general statements about areas of responsibility and duties to be undertaken by the post holder. There is a temptation to believe that this is a deliberate strategy on the part of the creators (either central or head of academic unit) as it permits proactive involvement of both the head of unit and the post holder at local

level in the practical interpretation and implementation of the role. Certainly the second case study job description (C2/16 D) supports this view as it explicitly states that the post holder will develop this new role's definition within the general framework of the job description and offers examples of areas of responsibility where this may occur.

The next section of this chapter discusses these three themes from the findings in the context of the conceptual framework, the literature on which it is based and the relevant research question posed at the outset of this investigation.

Discussion of findings

The findings presented above are interesting in the context of the literature on which this investigation is designed to build. The devolution of administrative responsibility from the centre to the academic unit is considered to be a common occurrence (Hare and Hare, 2002; Smith, 2002; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004) and it might be deduced from this that the definition of appropriate senior administrative support within the academic unit would be part of that devolution. The findings from the first case study would appear on first sight to disprove this assumption.

There are clear indications that the central university senior management has a strong desire to control the areas of responsibility for which the academic unit and senior administrators in post are accountable, and use the definition of the senior administrator role as one way of exerting this control. However, it is recognised that the growth of the role itself has been an organic one that has happened over a period of time within the academic unit. Gornitzka and Larsen's (2004) view of role

accretion, where the role develops organically may be in opposition to the view that the role is created independently of the post holder and the unit in which the role is situated. However their view is supported by the findings where:

... [the role] is defined by default and over time there is more organisation put into it and then you tend to centralise it and now this sort of thing is defined centrally.” (C1/1 SM 12-14)

Furthermore, the heads of the academic units are all members of the university’s senior management team and part of the committees that considered the job descriptions for the centrally defined roles. It could also be said that the central definition of the senior administrator role is actually a collaborative one that takes place either directly (case study one) or indirectly (case study two) between the institutional senior managers and the heads of the academic units.

This assignment of role definition by those who are not actually undertaking the role also supports the sociological view of role (Berger, 1963) whereby “... the individual actors ... need but slip into the roles already assigned to them ... [and] the social play can proceed as planned” (p112). However, the direct influence of the post holder in the operationalisation of the role definition may also demonstrate a move towards the more modern view held by Jenkins (2004) that a role in universities is a “... collection of rights and duties ...” (p140) and not just a role assigned by someone else.

This view held by the senior managers also counters that of Dobson and Conway (2003) that only the senior administrators themselves see this distinct role within the academic unit, as it is clear that there is an understanding and recognition of the role across the institution. This is more in line with the AUA (2004), Bassnett (2005) and

Hare and Hare's (2002) views that senior university administrators have taken on new and clearly defined responsibilities as a result of the changing nature of higher education in the UK. A joint view of how these roles will be managed has emerged at the first case study institution where one head of an academic unit notes that "... these post holders will also be dually line managed ..." (C1/5 HU 51) with the post holder being line managed by the central institutional senior manager and having day-to-day operational responsibility to their head of academic unit.

It could be suggested that this situation recognises the changing structure of academic units within universities (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Hogan, 2005) whereby the move to larger institutions with more students enrolled has resulted in the amalgamation of the smaller, single subject focussed academic departments into schools of study where groups of cognate subjects are brought together with a single budget devolved from the centre. There is recognition amongst the respondents and the literature (Hare and Hare, 2002) that these larger academic units are required to utilise single, cross-institutional management information systems and that centrally defined senior administrator roles, with post holders reporting to the relevant institutional senior manager, will assist in the most effective and efficient development and use of these systems.

Certainly one of the reasons why I think we need some central ... involvement in the [senior administrator] role in a very clear way, is the implementation of some of the student records systems ... and to bring on new systems and to make sure they work properly to make sure we get the management information that we require. (C1/4 HU 380-382)

Furthermore, the national funding body for higher education in the UK (HEFCE) has stated that it expects significant growth in the number of administrators required to

support the increasing student numbers over the period up to 2010/11 (HEFCE, 2006) and this combined approach to definition should support the necessary reporting requirements of this funding body. As one of the university's senior managers commented:

... [these roles] aren't to reduce staff costs, these are to contribute to the VC's 2010 agenda which is to get back to growth in HEFCE student numbers, re-profile our courses so we've got some courses that reflect emerging things nationally and internationally ... (C1/2 SM 283-285)

Key to the successful implementation of these roles is clearly the post holder's influence on the operationalisation of the job descriptions. All informants in both case studies (individual and documentary) recognise this and also note that:

In dialogue and discussion, for all these posts there are job descriptions that have been produced ... if you've got the right people, that there would be dialogue and comment about what they should and shouldn't be doing. (C1/5 HU 391-396)

Furthermore, there seems to be quite a lot of room for interpretation of the activities required to meet the expectations of the central management:

So they're a bit more distinct in terms of saying we think there's a need for someone to oversee this and co-ordinate it from a senior administrative point of view. I suppose in fact, it's a lot clearer in the range of functions they want me to look after, but in terms of how I do with those functions ... it's an evolving role. The role will evolve over the next year or two. (C1/10 PH 140-144)

For the senior administrator role in the second case study, the human resources post approval documentation states "... there will be considerable freedom to work creatively within these constraints [of regulation and legislation]". This is supported by comments made in the research diary about the fact that the "... the role would inevitably change because of the changing work of the unit" (C2/19 D p37).

By taking this approach where the post holder is responsible for identifying the exact work needed and then being accountable for it being undertaken according to institutional requirements, the central management and heads of units are empowering the senior administrators to use their experience and expertise. The post holder is able to develop not only the role but also themselves, thus adding value to the outcome of the centrally defined job description and personal satisfaction for the post holder. There is a clear sense that these roles are part of the university community (McNye, 2005) and the sharing of best practice within a common job description strengthens this further.

Summary of discussion

This section of the research has demonstrated that the overall definition of the senior administrator role is undertaken by either by the institutional central senior management team or by the head of the academic unit alone. How far these two scenarios are different is difficult to ascertain as the heads of units in this study were all members of the institutional senior management team as well. Consequently it is possible that there is a strong central institutional influence on the definition of the senior administrator role regardless of whether the team or the head of unit draws up the job description.

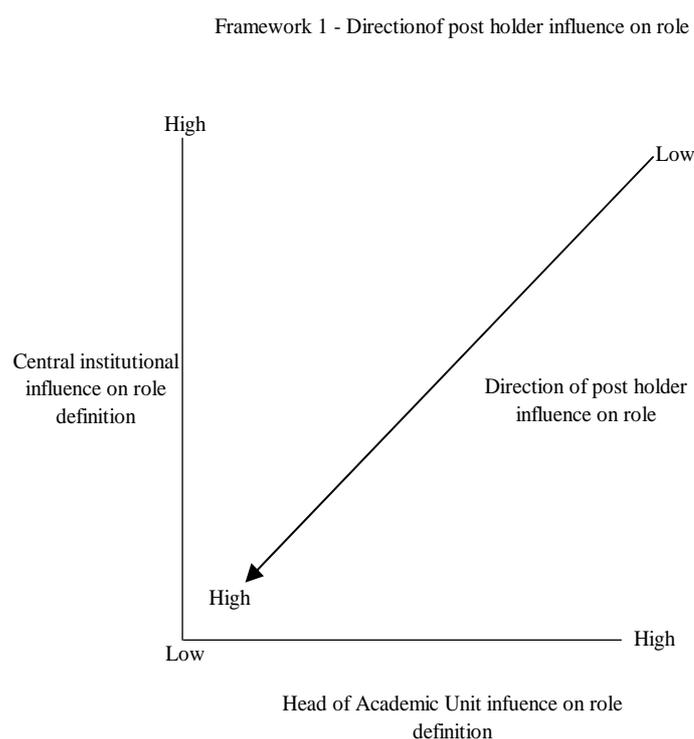
This approach does enable the head of the academic unit to have significant input into the responsibilities of the role and also to interpret the role within their local context, thus meeting their specific needs according to the nature of the work in their unit. Furthermore, the job description provides a valuable framework for the post holder to

use when operationalising the role and undertaking the responsibilities assigned to them. This definition provided by way of a job description is seen as an empowering tool by the post holder so they can then develop the role to meet those institutional needs in ways that reflect their own expertise and skills. However, to fully define the role requires the two elements to be consolidated, the creation of the job description and the implementation of the role described therein.

The next section revisits the initial conceptual framework in light of the outcome of this data analysis.

Conceptual framework one revisited

The initial framework (below) shows that the post holder's influence on the role definition diminishes as the level of influence by the university central senior management and head of academic unit increases. These two case studies do appear to demonstrate that there are strong levels of influence on the definition of the role by both the central institutional senior management and the head of the academic unit in which the post is situated. This does not seem to cause problems within either of the institutions rather it is welcomed as a means of providing a clear framework within which the post can be developed to meet local academic unit needs.



Each of the respondent groups in the first case study commented on the importance of developing the operationalisation of the role through dialogue. This is echoed in the

second case study where the post holder works closely with the head of the unit in the development and implementation of this new role and the fact that it is a role that will evolve over time.

The original framework appears to be supported by the findings of this section of the research as the strong influences brought to bear on the role definition by the institutional senior managers and the head of the academic unit do not permit direct influence by the post holder.

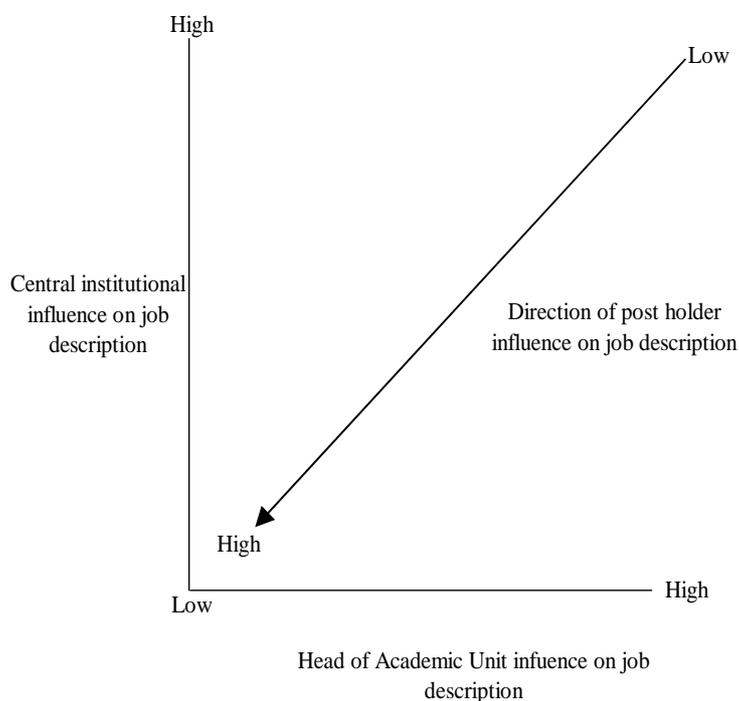
However, it is important to note that there is an apparently very strong influence from the head of unit on the implementation of the role as well as its formal definition through the job description (either directly or as part of the senior management team). There is some logic in this approach as it is the head of unit who is accountable for the work of their academic unit and is most aware of what is needed to effectively support it administratively.

What is interesting is the amount of influence the post holders appear to have in the way they actually operationalise the responsibilities assigned to them. In both case studies they are able to exercise considerable freedom and creativity in the methods and processes they use to meet the expectations of the role. Even where the head of unit has had a high level of influence in the design and definition of the role overall and its implementation at local level, the post holders still feel that they are able to exert their own influence on how they actually undertake their work and develop the administrative processes within the unit.

The importance of the job description to all three stakeholder groups considered in this research is somewhat surprising. It is definitely seen as a tool to support the post holder in their operationalisation of the role and as a means of control by the institution and head of the academic unit over the areas of responsibility assigned. Consequently the original conceptual framework that emerged from the literature and reviewed in this part of the research has generally been upheld as the post holder does have less influence over the role definition where the institution and the head of unit have high levels of influence. However, these influences are mainly surrounding the creation rather than the implementation of the job description which governs the overall areas of responsibility of the post holder.

Therefore, the framework (below) has been revised to reflect influence over the job description rather than over the whole definition of the role. This is because the full definition of the role comprises both the job description and the implementation and operationalisation of the responsibilities assigned and all three stakeholders have strong areas of influence in different aspects of this process.

Framework 1 revised - Direction of post holder influence on the creation of the job description



There is one issue that has not been explicitly resolved by this research and that is whether the post holder's influence on the job description would increase if there was low influence from the institution and/or head of the academic unit. As both case studies demonstrated strong influences from both these stakeholders there are no data to show what would be the impact on the post holder's level of influence in this alternative scenario. However, there has been some mention of the historical situation of role definition in the first case study where it was observed that the role developed organically and that it was largely due to specific post holder's personal views of the opportunities available to develop the post that defined the role. This does imply that the post holder had a stronger influence over the responsibilities of the role in these circumstances where the institution and head of unit were less influential. Therefore I

believe that this revised conceptual framework is supported by the evidence provided by this research.

The next section of this chapter considers the findings for the second conceptual framework which considers how clearly defined the role is, how wide ranging the duties are and how far the post holders are undertaking responsibilities and duties that were previously that of academic staff.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS FOR SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS' RESPONSIBILITIES (CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TWO)

Introduction

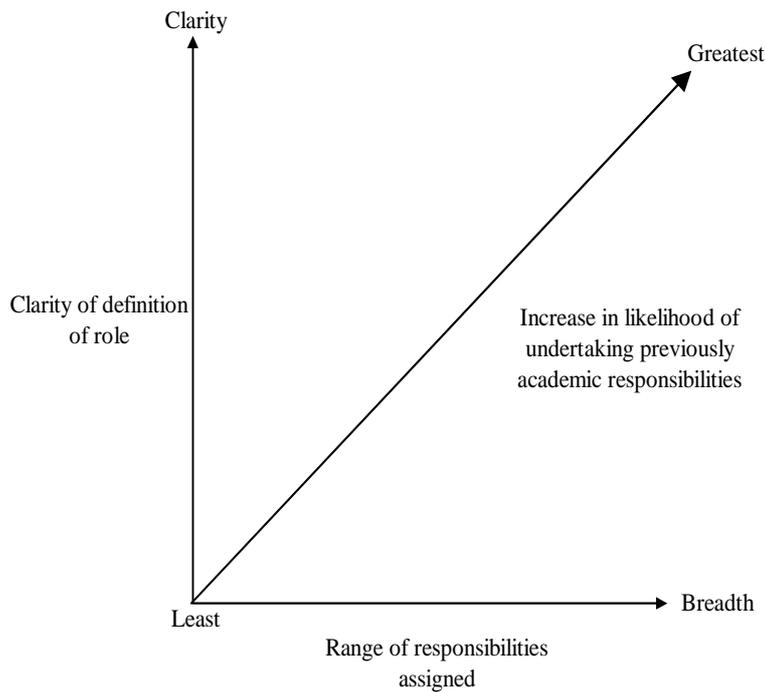
The aim of this section of the thesis is to try to find out how likely it is that the senior administrators in academic units are now undertaking responsibilities that were previously those of academic staff. The data relating to these aspects of the senior administrator role are now presented and analysed taking account of the two case study contexts. Consideration is also given to where there are similarities and differences in the findings and how these may or may not impact on the framework.

This analysis focuses on the axes of the conceptual framework (below) that emerged from the literature review and on which the research questions and data analysis coding structures were based.

In the first framework reviewed in the previous section of this chapter, the issue of who had the most influence over the definition of the role job description was considered. In this section the data analysis seeks to understand how clearly the role is defined in relation to the implementation of the post and how important this clarity might be for the post holders and their colleagues. Furthermore, an attempt is made to develop an understanding of what the post holders are actually responsible for and how wide that range of duties might be. The initial framework that emerged from the literature presents the possibility that where the role is very clearly defined and is

coupled with a greater range of responsibilities, then there is a greater likelihood that the post holder is undertaking more activities that have historically been undertaken by academic staff.

Framework 2 - Likelihood of role undertaking responsibilities previously assigned to academics



The findings appear to support this initial conceptual framework and show that the post holders are definitely taking on more responsibilities that were once undertaken by academic staff; however, how far this is because of a more clearly defined role that also has a wide range of activities assigned to it is more of a challenge to resolve.

The next section presents the findings under each of these three axes and is followed by a discussion of them in relation to the literature reviewed and the initial conceptual framework.

Presentation of findings

Clarity of definition of role

In both case studies there is agreement that it is necessary for the role to be clearly defined. However there are two main areas where this definition has an impact:

- the way the post holder understands what they are responsible for;
- how other people know what the post holder is responsible for and what can be expected from them.

As discussed in the analysis of the data for the previous framework, the post holders all use their job descriptions as tools for understanding what they are responsible for. They are then able to operationalise those requirements within their local context. Here a key activity appears to be the need to make sure that all colleagues are aware of what the post holder is doing and what areas of the academic unit's work they will be working together on.

This is particularly clear in the second case study where the senior administrator role is a new one for the academic unit. The research diary and probation review documents both include comments on the importance of colleagues understanding what this new role of senior administrator is responsible for:

[The head of unit] made a very clear statement that [the post holder] is most definitely the team leader for all administrative support staff in the [unit] at the end of the [staff] meeting. (C2/21 D p15)

My main aims have been to become familiar with the people, systems and process of both the [academic unit] and the university as quickly as possible and to create an identity for this new role within the [unit]. (C2/20 D p1)

The need for colleagues and students to know under what circumstances they should contact the post holder and the extent to which they can expect that person to be able to assist them is one of the most important aspects of developing this understanding within the unit. The first case study refers to situations where colleagues do and do not know what to approach the administrator for:

... I'm the first port of call for academic members of staff, they rely on me totally for what they can and can't do. (C1/8 PH 41-43)

... it's clarity, it's focus, and it's also making sure that staff understand who they need to go to if they've got an issue. (C1/4 HU 204-205)

Where there is effective dialogue between the post holder and colleagues, then greater efficiency can be achieved by using the best people to undertake specific responsibilities within the clearly defined remit and thus avoid situations of potential difficulty:

I think we've got a number [of people] that get frustrated because they feel they are doing things that admin people should do ... (C1/5 HU 176)

Reflecting back to the previous conceptual framework on the influences over the creation of the job descriptions, one of the reasons given by all respondents in the first case study for a move towards central institutional definition was the desire to improve communication. This certainly seems to be a key influence for this analysis with regards to the importance of the post holder communicating what their responsibilities are effectively amongst their colleagues. However, this is just part of having a clearly defined role, it is also important that the head of the academic unit

actively supports the definition and implementation of the role (as seen in the second case study) and that there is a consensus between them and the post holder of what that is.

From these findings there appear to be three main aspects of ensuring that the role is clearly understood by the post holder and their colleagues:

- that the head of unit fully understands the role and proactively supports it;
- that the post holder has the same understanding of the role as the head of the unit and communicates it effectively with everyone they work with;
- that everyone who comes into contact with, or needs to use the services of, the senior administrator is well aware of their remit.

When these three aspects are all present then the clarity of the role definition can be said to be high and the highest level of understanding and potential for effective and efficient working can be established.

Range of responsibilities

Part of the aim of this research is to develop a greater understanding of what senior administrators actually do within their roles. The evidence gathered during this research shows that there is a very wide range of activities that fall within the remit of the role and that the overall financial administration of the unit has been separated from the main administrative functions in both case study institutions.

From the job descriptions (both administrative and finance focused) from both case study institutions the main areas of responsibility can be summarised into a number of key areas:

- Administration relating to legislation, regulations, policy and procedures;
- Quality assurance and enhancement;
- Administrative systems implementation and development;
- Management of relevant administrative staff within remit of job description;
- Administrative support for students within remit of job description;
- Relevant information management (eg student records, financial data) and analysis.

Within each of these areas the post holder is expected to provide support and develop the appropriate systems in conjunction with the central institutional requirements:

... it's to be the person responsible for advising, guiding and administering all registry functions in a devolved way throughout the [academic units]. (C1/1 SM 204-205)

A lot to do with academic standards ... and looking after the processes and running of [an academic unit] from the academic quality point of view. (C1/2 SM 85-87)

... where possible, find better ways of [implementing the university's regulatory framework] ... and that's what it's about in a sense, about taking the students through the lifecycle of their life at university ... [the senior administrators] do have an important role to play in academic quality, because it's about the quality of the student experience. (C1/4 HU 238-249)

... one of the key roles for [the senior administrator] is ... [to] bring those policies, procedures and practices together ... (C1/6 PH 110-112)

I run the admin team in the [unit], so I have to make sure that the [unit] runs appropriately and we provide the support to the academic staff and management staff that is required. (C1/8 PH 43-45)

In the first case study the senior administrators fall into two distinct groups, one with mainly financial and resources responsibilities and the other with responsibilities focused on supporting academic colleagues and the services provided to students by the academic unit. Interestingly respondents in this case study also commented on situations where the roles had been less focussed in the past with responsibilities that covered both areas that had now become separated:

Some people have financial functions, some people have a lot of financial functions and their role has moved along, and although they might be responsible for the admin teams, and not every [senior administrator] traditionally had a personnel role ... initially when I was appointed here I did not have a team at all ... it is much, much better now that I am in charge. (C1/8 PH 101-109 – non-finance focused role)

In some [academic units] it is almost purely a financial role, in a couple of other [units] it has taken on a lot wider remit [in the past]... (C1/9 PH 11-12 – finance focused role)

As part of the central definition of the role this first case study institution has taken the decision that the two functions will be administered separately by appropriately qualified and experienced people in order to improve communication amongst the post holders and the central institutional management and related functions. This view is reflected in the second case study institution as the senior administrator role reviewed has no overall financial responsibilities other than:

... the post holder will handle a number of short-term and sometimes recurring, rather than continuing, accounts specifically allocated to projects. (C2/19 D p4)

In summary, the range of responsibilities assigned to the senior administrator is very wide and focuses very strongly on the implementation and development of systems and how these then interact with people coming into contact with them and the unit, both staff and students. However, it is also important for the role to have a coherency within its range of activities and in these case studies this has become either 1) a generalist administrative role with a focus on academic work, or 2) a financial administrative role with a stronger business focus. These then require different levels of working with colleagues and students within the unit, although ultimately both groups will be impacted upon by both senior administrator roles in the overall effectiveness of the work of the unit.

Responsibilities previously undertaken by academic staff

There is a consensus of opinion throughout the two case study institutions that the senior administrator role has been designed to take up some responsibilities that previously belonged to academic staff, or that would inevitably be done by academics if the role did not exist:

... to help staff realise that [the senior administrators] are there to support them, to free them up to do their work. (C1/1 SM 234-235)

... if I wasn't here. We wouldn't do well on quality, we wouldn't perform well with HEFCE targets and things like that ... the academics ... could look up the academic regulations themselves ... (C1/8 PH 463-467)

However, it is also noted that some academic staff do not necessarily want to be freed up from administrative tasks, as there is the perception that things will only be done properly if the academic does it for themselves:

Some academics don't necessarily want to be freed up and others would like to, and others just get on with it because it's just what you have to do to make the system work. (C1/5 HU 157-158)

This last comment again illustrates the importance of strong communication within the unit between the senior administrator and their colleagues. Where there is a good understanding of the definition of the role and what can be expected of the post holder, this negative response should be avoided.

These responsibilities include the management of the unit's budget that was historically the responsibility of the head of unit and has now been passed to the appropriately qualified financial senior administrator who liaises with the head in accordance with the procedures of the institution and local practice that has been developed during the implementation of the job description.

Other student focused processes in the first case study that were hitherto undertaken by academic staff and are now the responsibility entirely of the senior administrator, are especially in the areas of admissions and student records. In one unit this development was as a result of there being a shortage of subject-specialist academic staff to undertake admissions duties and the senior administrator took on the responsibility for the processes and trained administrative staff to a higher level of competence than had been achieved by the academics initially (C1/7 PH 273-287). In another unit the way CRB (criminal records bureau) checks were processed by academic staff was evaluated by the senior administrator and a more efficient and effective system designed and implemented by the post holder in order to relieve their academic colleagues of a very time-consuming activity and free them up for more appropriate activity (C1/5 HU 138-152).

The senior administrator role in the second case study has been established with the explicit intention that the head of unit and the unit's senior managers and other academic staff are able to relinquish a number of responsibilities they have historically undertaken. The human resource documentation supporting the creation of the post states that:

This is a new post to which, it is hoped, the [unit's] senior academic officers will be able to delegate some of their current duties. (C2/19 D p6)

If the post holder is working successfully he/she will take up a considerable burden that would otherwise fall to the head and [unit senior managers]. (C2/19 D p3)

Furthermore, the research diary comments on the fact that the post holder is taking on a number of activities directly from academic staff (C2/21 D pp2, 4, 7 and 13). It is noted that there has been a positive response from academic colleagues that they will be able to pass over a number of responsibilities directly to the new post, whilst recognising that there will also be the necessity to develop highly effective communication channels to enable this to happen and to continue to support and develop the process further.

Summary of findings

A number of main themes have emerged from this research with regards to the clarity of role definition, the breadth and range of duties undertaken and the likelihood of the post holder undertaking responsibilities that were previously assigned to academic colleagues:

- The increase in responsibilities assigned to the head of the academic unit has resulted in the need for a senior administrator to take on a number of activities that were previously done by the head;
- The senior administrator needs to communicate their role and responsibilities to all colleagues and students with the full and pro-active support of the head;
- Academic colleagues need to be aware of the benefits to them of having the senior administrator relieve them of higher level administrative tasks in order for effective working relationships to be developed.

There is evidence from these two case studies of a conscious move towards developing senior administrator roles to help relieve the academic staff of administrative responsibilities, and in particular the head of unit and other senior academic colleagues. These responsibilities are wide ranging and respond to local as well as institutional need, requiring the post holder to develop effective ways of communicating their activities to others within the unit and the wider university community. There appears to be a developing working relationship between the senior administrator and their academic colleagues as a result of the post holders taking on a number of responsibilities previously assigned to the academic staff and this aspect of the role will be investigated as part of the next conceptual framework later in the chapter.

Discussion of findings

These findings for the second conceptual framework relating to the responsibilities of the senior administrator role and the extent to which the post holders have taken on activities previously undertaken by academic staff are interesting in the context of the literature reviewed for this research. Bassnett (2005), Hare and Hare (2002), and Smith (2002) all identified the growth in many aspects of the role of the head of the academic unit and that the only way these could be fulfilled was through the development of high-level senior administrators to undertake many of the specialist administrative responsibilities. This would certainly appear to be the case in both of these case studies where the respondents and documents all support the concept that the role has been developed (case study one) or created (case study two) specifically to do just this.

Dobson and Conway (2003) noted that the core business of a university (academic research, teaching and scholarship) could no longer be executed without the contribution of senior administrators. It is important for these post holders to be able to define clearly how their work contributes to this core business in order that they are accepted in these roles by their academic colleagues. The data from this research strongly support this response to the changing environment as both institutions have implemented changes to the senior administrator role in order to provide support to the head of the academic unit for such changes. Furthermore, through the very act of relieving academic staff of specialised administrative responsibilities (eg administrative systems development, financial management, statistical analysis) the senior administrators are enabling their academic colleagues to spend more time on their core business activities. This has become particularly important with the

national move towards more accountability for teaching and learning outcomes and demands for increased levels of research output.

Having discovered evidence in the data to support the view that heads of academic units are utilising senior administrators to support their work, it is logical to consider the clarity of the definition of the role that is providing that support. Whitchurch (2004) and others (McInnis, 1998; Dobson and Conway, 2003; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004) commented that there is a consensus that there is a lack of understanding about how clarity of role definition is achieved. Furthermore, with HEFCE (2005) predicting the creation of many more administrative posts to support the projected increases in student numbers in 2010-11, it will become even more important that everyone has a clear understanding of the role definitions.

In this research the evidence supports the concept that there are two significant aspects in trying to achieve this clarity; these are 1) a clearly defined job description and 2) excellent communication of the role's remit to all colleagues and other stakeholders (eg students, institutional senior managers) particularly by the head of the academic unit. The first conceptual framework considered the first of these in detail, so this section focuses more on the second of these aspects which concerns the actual responsibilities of the post holder.

Gumport and Pusser (1995) noted that there are many different elements that comprise university administration that are also to be found in most large businesses (eg institutional senior managers, accountants, legal services, estates management). However, they recognised that a university has an additional layer of administration

relating to students and that this should not be overlooked. This also impacts on the process of defining the role of the senior administrator as there is a need for students as well as colleagues to have a clear understanding of what the post holder is responsible for; thus making the communication process more complex and open to misinterpretation.

Bassnett (2005) notes the importance of the role with regards to supporting academic staff on a wide range of matters so that the academics "... did not find themselves in situations ... they did not understand, or unable to answer students' questions about the changing university world they inhabit." (p102)

There is a general recognition amongst the respondents in the first case study that the senior administrator role has an impact on the student experience either directly or indirectly. This depends on whether the focus is on providing specific advice and guidance to students on administrative aspects of their registration and programme of study, developing effective and efficient systems to support both student and staff procedures, or supporting the academic staff in their teaching and learning activities.

The second case study documentation includes examples of responsibilities that include the unit's teaching timetable and development of the academic unit's main student and staff support office and states that the:

Key duties will include contributing to, and assisting in the development of centralised support activities and to oversee, support and be responsible for the delivery of a range of activities within the [unit]. (C2/16 D p7)

So these two case studies demonstrate that there is a clear need for the post holders to be able to communicate this wide range of duties to all the parties involved in order for them to be able to deliver the clear definition described by Gumport and Pusser (1995).

This also reflects the very wide range of responsibilities assigned to the post holders (Szekeres, 2004) and the freedom they have to implement and operationalise the job descriptions within their academic units. This is where the sociological view of role (Berger, 1963) as a pre-determined activity being enacted within a specific social context with standard expectations on the part of the stakeholders is interesting. The institutional senior managers in the first case study appear to have some expectation of this happening and even mention that they would prefer the roles to be identical in each unit so that any one of the post holders could move to another unit and pick up the work with little or no adjustment to their practice, although the post holders seem to think differently:

... I'm supposed to do exactly the same job in this [unit] as another [senior administrator] in another one ... unfortunately ... I don't think that's going to be the case because different [heads of units] have got different ideas about how they want to utilise staffing in their [units]. (C1/7 PH 85)

This demonstrates the views of Jenkins (2004) who recognises that there are now much stronger influences from the individuals undertaking the roles which have now become more of a "... collection of rights and duties ..." (p140) which carry a status rather than the cleanly described roles that could be acted out in a pre-determined way historically. Furthermore, the job descriptions in both case studies provide details of the general areas of responsibilities and consequently it will be inevitable that each post holder will undertake different specific tasks to achieve the expected outcomes.

This will be particularly the case when undertaking activities that were previously those of academic staff, as each academic unit has its own expectations and staffing structure in both these case studies. McNye (2005) particularly identifies the situation where the changes in higher education practice towards teaching, learning and research mean that administrative staff have more accessible working patterns than academic staff and are therefore more able to provide effective and accessible administration than their academic colleagues in many areas (eg admissions, enrolment and timetabling).

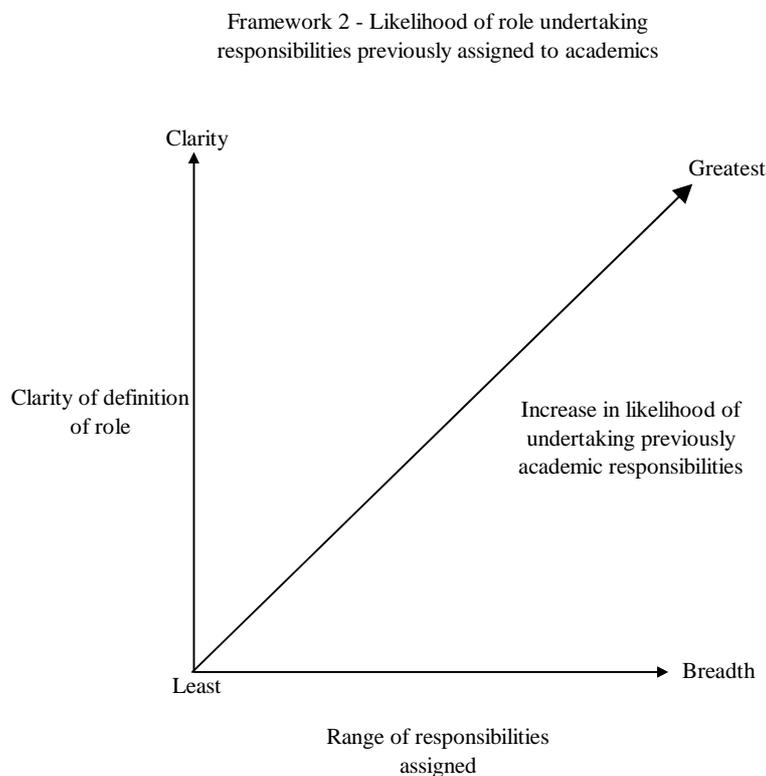
Summary of discussion

This section of the research has demonstrated that the senior administrators in academic units have very wide ranging responsibilities that have developed because of the changing nature of higher education and the growth of the head of academic unit role. The senior administrator role needs to be supported by the head of unit as well as being clearly understood and recognised by their colleagues and students for the post holders to be able to work effectively. As in the first framework analysis, communication is seen as a very important element of the practical development of the role definition. No longer is it sufficient to act out a role with a particular title in a standard way, the increasing student numbers and changes in accountability and activity in higher education have resulted in local interpretation and implementation by the post holder and head of unit in order to meet local business needs. These local requirements often include the transfer of responsibilities from academic staff to the senior administrator so that the academic colleagues can be freed up to undertake more appropriate activities and also to enable administrative tasks to be undertaken by the most relevant people with the greatest expertise in that area. This issue of

expertise and ability will be considered in more detail within the final conceptual framework later in this chapter.

Conceptual framework two revisited

The initial framework (below) shows that there is a greater likelihood of the senior administrator undertaking responsibilities that were previously assigned to academic colleagues where there is a wide range of responsibilities accompanied by high clarity of role definition.



This research does support this initial framework and provides evidence that there is a very wide range of duties undertaken by the post holders and that because of the current changes to higher education student numbers and accountability regimes, a number of these were previously assigned to the head of the unit or other academic staff. It was also apparent in the first case study that the post holders believe that if

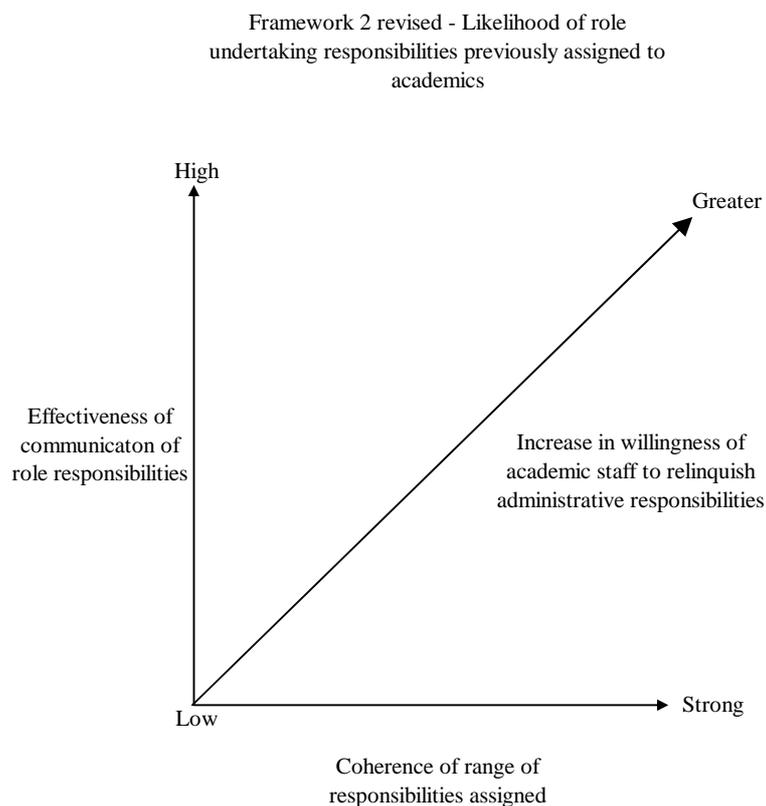
the role were to be removed a number of the activities would inevitably revert to the academic staff themselves rather than to other administrators.

Following on from the first conceptual framework that considered the influences on the role definition and job descriptions, this section has also provided evidence that it is very important that the role is very clearly defined to enable the post holder to undertake their duties effectively. In this instance the definition is more interpersonal in nature and the post holder needs to clearly communicate their responsibilities to their colleagues and the students they come into contact with.

The evidence from this research supports the need for clarity of definition but also demonstrates that this definition needs to provide a coherent picture of the overall remit of the role. The remit may be specialist (eg financial) or generalist (eg academic administration) in nature, but it appears to be necessary for this to be clearly understood by everyone for the role to be effective. Where the role has become too divergent, as in the historical situation in the first case study, confusion has arisen and the institution has taken control of the role definition and given it a more specific job description. The newly formed role in the second case study was created with this coherent focus in the first place, whilst recognising that the post holder would develop the role in response to the changing needs of the business.

Again it is clear that the ability to clearly define the senior administrator role requires both a well constructed job description and an effective implementation and communication strategy to ensure everyone is aware of the role and its responsibilities.

Consequently, the second initial conceptual framework has been revised slightly to reflect these findings, and now shows that where there is highly effective communication of the role’s responsibilities and a coherent range of responsibilities assigned, then the academic colleagues are more likely to relinquish administrative duties previously undertaken by them. In effect, the academic staff are more likely to trust the post holder when they can understand what they are there for and how they can free up some of their time to permit them to undertake more appropriate activities.



This revised framework raises the issue of collaboration with academic colleagues, the perceptions they hold of the role and post holder and how important it is to the successful implementation of the senior administrator role that their work is seen as

very important to the success of the unit. This is an issue that is considered in the next section of this chapter and the third and final conceptual framework of this research.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS FOR PERCEPTIONS OF SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS (CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK THREE)

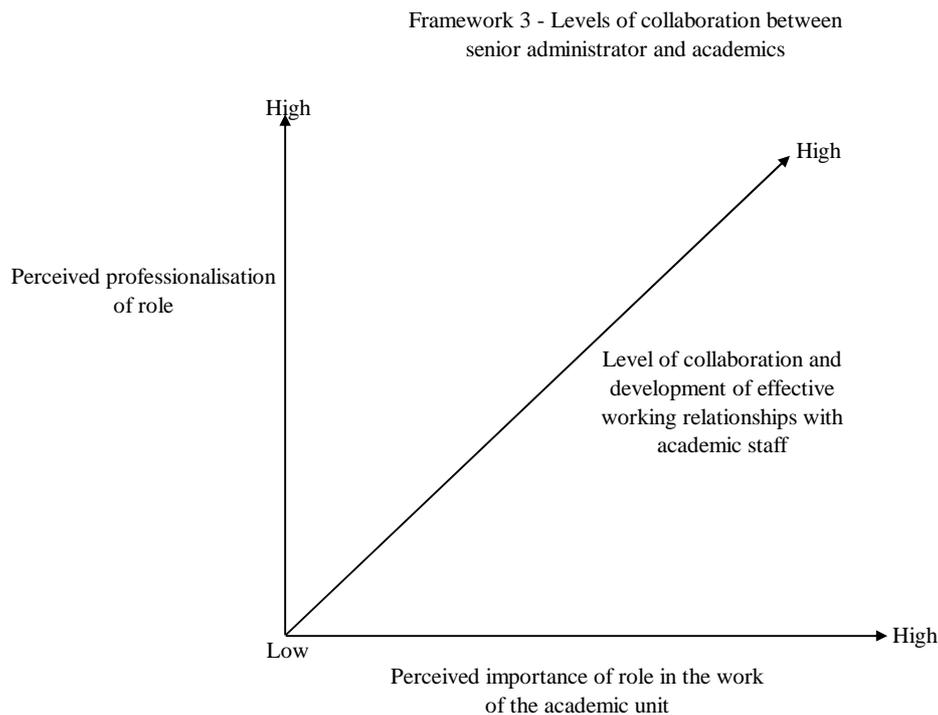
Introduction

The aim of this final section of the thesis is to discover more about the perceptions held of the senior administrator role, how important their work is believed to be in the overall work of the unit and whether these impact on the level of collaboration between the post holder and the academic staff. The data obtained during this study are now presented and analysed in the context of the two case studies. Consideration is also given to where there are similarities and differences in the findings and how these may or may not impact on the framework. Following on from the data presentation sections consideration is given to these analyses in the context of the literature reviewed at part of this research.

This analysis focuses on the axes of the conceptual framework (below) that emerged from the literature review and on which the research questions and data analysis coding structures were based.

In the first two frameworks reviewed in earlier sections of this chapter, the issue of role definition was to the fore and the evidence suggests that this has two elements: 1) the job description and 2) the communication of the role's responsibilities to stakeholders which informs their expectations of the role. In this final framework consideration is given to the perceptions held by the stakeholders of how far the

senior administrator role is perceived to be one of professional standing and the importance of the role to the work of the unit. The literature appears to link these perceptions with supporting higher levels of collaboration between the post holder and their academic colleagues.



The next section presents the findings under each of these three aspects and is followed in the succeeding section by a discussion of them in relation to the literature reviewed and the initial conceptual framework.

Presentation of findings

Perceived professionalisation of role

This research has demonstrated that there are two distinct elements to the perceptions of professionalisation of the senior administrator role held by the respondents in the

first case study. These relate to what professionalisation means and whether or not the role itself can be seen as having become professional. The general consensus in the findings from this research is that the role has become increasingly professional in nature because of the level of the work undertaken and the experience of the people undertaking the role:

In my view it's a professional role because of the responsibility that I have to undertake, the knowledge that I hold and the advice I am expected to give.
(C1/7 PH 181-182)

These two elements of professionalisation will now be presented separately with what professionalisation means being considered first so that this will then underpin the next section where the perceptions held of the role are the focus. The links with the literature on this aspect are considered later in this chapter.

Professionalisation

The respondents in the first case study believe that the main characteristics of professionalisation lie mainly around the areas: 1) how the job is done by the post holder (including personal attitude and interpersonal skills), and 2) the knowledge and expertise held by that person and the continuing professional development undertaken by them.

This feeling of professionalisation is strong within both case studies and is encapsulated in the quotation:

... that is basically the way you do the job, you do your job professionally, you create a professional image of the role that you are in ... [you] support your role by being up to date, both in terms of the field that you're in, but also general management skills and professional qualifications. (C1/7 PH 210-214)

Just as the first two frameworks have demonstrated the importance of communication in the development and implementation of the role, so communication is also seen as being critical to the professionalisation of the role:

... a professional, to be knowledgeable and to be able to influence and communicate ... (C1/1 SM 112-113)

This introduces the issue of what level of knowledge is required for the role to be considered a professional one. These generally fall into three main areas: 1) relevant professional qualifications, 2) formal academic qualifications and 3) continuing professional development.

On the first point this can be by way of a recognised professional qualification. In the case of senior administrators with a financial focus of responsibility they are required to hold an appropriate accountancy qualification. There are some different issues with regards to qualifications for generalist senior administrators. It is generally recognised within both case studies that the post is seen as being of graduate level entry. However, the senior managers and heads of academic units in the first case study commented that one of the problems with enabling the role to be seen as a professional one was that it needed:

... some national standards, and national guidelines and nationally recognised qualifications. And some kind of core element of the role that was shared nationally. (C1/2 SM 67-69)

... there's not a professional qualification for a registrar, an academic registrar. (C1/2 SM 62-63)

The first and second points are often considered as one single aspect of recruitment where applicants are asked that they should be “qualified to degree level or holding a relevant professional qualification” (C1/13 D p3). This certainly raises the question of which qualification would be accepted as relevant. The second case study job description states that the post holder should have “a good honours degree or equivalent” (C2/16 D p9) but makes no reference to any professionally related qualifications.

The third issue, that of continuing professional development is a different one where the post holder is not a member of a professional body as there is no external requirement that continuing professional development should be undertaken. In this instance knowledge development becomes both a personal and institutional matter to ensure that the post holders are using the most up to date and relevant knowledge and skills to execute their responsibilities.

There is also the issue of knowledge gained through experience and study undertaken in the work place. This is recognised as being essential by all respondents as it can directly address the local issues in a practical way:

A lot of it is on the job training of reasonably bright people who see route-ways through [the career structure], and often that route-way is doing a degree or postgraduate qualification or something. (C1/4 HU 145-146)

I saw the potential of a business degree fulfilling quite a few aspects [of the role] ... it gave me more creative ideas of how to come back into the workplace and solve problems. (C1/10 PH 61-67)

... I’m very happy with people to have Masters, MBAs, PhDs, in fact I think they’re a good idea, but I would prefer to have someone who knows what ... they are doing ... (C1/1 SM 582-584)

The second case study diary and probationary documentation also report that the institution is sponsoring the post holder to undertake further professional study relevant to specific aspects of the role in order to further develop their professional capability.

In summary, professionalisation is seen from the data to have the following aspects, all of which are essential for the successful implementation of the role and effectiveness of the post holder:

1. High levels of appropriate knowledge and understanding;
2. Relevant skills and expertise;
3. Relevant qualifications and a commitment to continuing professional development activity;
4. Highly effective communication skills.

Perception of the role

Having identified the main characteristics of professionalisation in the context of the senior administrator role it is possible to review the findings in relation to how far the role is perceived to be professional by the respective stakeholders in this research:

... the capability and competence of individuals will clearly influence how people think about the post ... (C1/4 HU 175-176)

The perception that the senior administrator role is a professional one is held by all of the respondents in the first case study and is supported by the documentary evidence in the second one. However, it is recognised that the extent to which this

professionalisation happens is affected by the way the post holder implements the role and behaves once in post.

Having the professional qualification is neither necessary nor sufficient to get the respect of your customer. (C1/3 SM 254-255)

There is also quite a significant impact from the level of recognition given to the role by the institutional senior managers and heads of units, with one senior manager from the first case study commenting that there is an institutional desire to "... move forward with this professional image." (C1/1 SM 505-506). Further comments reflect the importance of both the personal and institutional perceptions of how professional the role is seen to be:

In the context of university administration I think feel that there's a major problem in that some of our colleagues do not often recognise the professionalism of the [senior administrator]... (C1/7 PH 182-185)

As a senior administrator in this university I'm deemed to be perceived as a professional person that acts professionally, and responds professionally when anything is asked of me ... (C1/10 PH 243-244)

... proactive approach and refreshing insights into ... operations. (C2/20 D p2)

The way the post holder approaches their work and colleagues appears to be the critical influencer in the way the role is perceived by other stakeholders. There can be significant difficulties with this when colleagues only have occasional contact with the post holder or responsibilities of the role:

... colleagues tend to form views on the basis of some often quite limited interactions really, and so there'll be some people who say yes, they see it very much as a professional job ... others will simply say, oh, it's just bureaucracy. (C1/4 HU 152-155)

It is the ability of the individual that enables them to communicate as a professional with their colleagues and the students to demonstrate that they are people who have:

... developed careers in that way, that are usually graduates and they've graduate entry into those sorts of areas, and have got a professional expertise and a knowledge-base and know-how relating to the area in which they work. (C1/5 HU 85-87)

... I've always perceived them as being professional in the sense that the two post holders acted professionally as far as I was concerned. I think the university is viewing the professionalisation of these roles as being critical to their success, and I think that's a good thing. (C1/6 HU 351-354)

The overriding factor in the perception of the senior administrator role being a professional one is the view held by the head of the academic unit in which the role is based. One post holder in the first case study institution commented that they are seen as a professional because their head of unit "... recognises the need for professional administrators to work alongside professional academics ..." (C1/7 PH 422-423). This is echoed in the second case study where the post holder has been proactively supported by the head of unit in their role as team leader for the whole administrative function of the unit (C2/21 D p15) and would be the main source of professional guidance on administrative matters for everyone in the unit.

In summary, the senior administrator is generally perceived to be undertaking a professional role within the academic unit and wider university community. Although it is recognised that this perception is strongly influenced by the way in which the post holder demonstrate their skills and expertise and uses their knowledge and understanding to the benefit of the unit and their colleagues. The key to the senior

administrator role being seen as a professional one is the development of highly effective working relationships within the unit through the undertaking of work that is recognised as being important to that unit.

The next section considers how important the senior administrator role is perceived to be to the work of the academic unit, it builds on the findings above that demonstrate that the post holder will only develop a professional status if they are able to communicate and work appropriately with colleagues, and the section after that presents the findings in relation to how far the role is seen to be collaborative with academic colleagues.

Perceived importance of role in the work of the academic unit

This role is generally perceived to be of great importance to the work of the academic unit by everyone surveyed in the first case study and throughout the documentation of the second. Furthermore, it is seen to be vital to driving forward the institutional vision at the first case study institution and as such the centralisation of the role has been introduced to underpin this higher level of involvement. The second case study institution works on a much more devolved basis where the role is seen to be essential to the success of the unit, whilst still impacting at institutional level. The level of involvement at both institutions ranges from direct to indirect depending on the nature of the responsibility and also on the contextual area of business being considered:

... we see [the senior administrator role] as key. Some of the things we have fallen down on in the past [are] because of the variable performance of the [post holders]. (C1/2 SM 92-93)

The role is requiring the post holder to become proactive in their interactions with staff and not just to act in a support or servant-style role.

The academic unit of the second case study clearly believes that this is a key role as “the impact of the work undertaken will affect all parts of the unit and often the university” and that “this post is the most important of all within the unit’s support structure” (C2/19 D pp3-4).

There is recognition amongst the post holders that the role is becoming more important within the whole sector and that it is not just at institutional level that the changes are being seen.

They’re becoming quite essential within the sector, so I think there are quite a lot of opportunities for senior administrators who are prepared to take a professional approach to the roles. (C1/10 PH 262-264)

This may well also have a significant impact on the professionalisation of the post as the national recognition referred to by some of the respondents in the preceding section is achieved. This role appears to be one that is not only developing within the two institutions considered by this research, but also at a national level and this issue will be considered in the context of the literature in the discussion of findings section later in this chapter.

As the senior administrator role is perceived to be key to the work of the academic unit, it is important to consider how far the post holders develop their working relationships with academic staff in order to achieve this level of involvement and to discharge their responsibilities in a professional manner to improve the perceptions

held of the role by their colleagues. The next section presents that data relating to this that were obtained during this research.

Effectiveness of working relationships with academic staff

It has emerged from the findings that both case study institutions believe that communication is the single most important factor when considering the definition, professionalisation and impact of the senior administrator role in an academic unit. This communication needs to be with all those colleagues and other stakeholders on whom the role impacts so that there is the highest possible level of understanding of the role's responsibilities and duties. This communication is effected by the stakeholders through many channels using varying combinations of written, verbal and electronic methods and is aimed at increasing and improving the effectiveness of the working relationship between senior administrators and academic colleagues and the smooth running of the unit and wider institution.

A number of important aspects of this relationship have been identified during this research that were shared by all respondents from both case studies and include:

- Taking on responsibilities that were hitherto undertaken by academic staff;
... you have [senior administrators] whose level of knowledge in certain areas now after four or five years is way above academic staff who had been fulfilling that same function before, the professional administrator actually knows more than those people had known then. (C1/7 PH 281-284)

- Providing professional guidance and advice on a range of administrative matters that academic staff are involved in (eg committee business);

The workings of this post will affect every academic member of staff in the [unit] in most aspects of their employment ... [and] ... endeavour to ensure ... the implementation of decisions and ideas approved with [unit committees] ... and to encourage a culture of continuing quality enhancement. (C2/19 D p5)

- Professional service providers to academic colleagues (eg unit accountant).

It's the personal and intellectual skills that the person would bring to their role ... [that] ... also carries some weight in a university in terms of basic credibility with the other people they will have to work with in terms of academic staff as their customers. (C1/3 SM 322-325)

Both case study institutions have stated that they expect the senior administrator to be relieving heads of units and academic colleagues of administrative responsibilities to free them up to be able to spend more time on management and academic activities by advising them of the most effective and efficient means of implementing administrative policies and procedures and systems:

... will take up a considerable burden that would otherwise fall to the head of unit or unit senior staff. (C2/19 D p3)

... [senior administrators] are experienced people with professional expertise in administration and they will advise the academics and work with them about how administrative services should be run. (C1/5 HU 64-66)

There was some disagreement amongst the respondents of the first case study institution as to whether the role incumbent should work directly with academic colleagues, thus improving the performance of both parties, or in an advisory and support capacity. It is the move towards the colleague status that is improving the working relationship and effectiveness of the contribution to the unit of the post holder's work.

All of the job descriptions from both institutions refer to the necessity for the post holder to have the ability to work closely with other staff at all levels in the unit, to provide appropriate advice and guidance and to liaise with a wide range of staff within the unit and the wider university and external academic communities. Often the work of the post holder is critical to enabling academic and management colleagues to discharge their own responsibilities:

... [the head of unit] relies quite considerably on the work I do and the advice I give to the [head] and so on around the [unit], around the university and up the university chain. (C1/9 PH 194-196)

In summary, the senior administrator role is perceived to work closely with all staff in the academic unit and, in particular, with the head of unit and academic colleagues.

The nature of that work ranges from taking over responsibilities so that academic colleagues no longer have to do them, through working together with them on achieving improvements to various aspects of the unit's business, to providing advice and guidance on a range of either specialist (eg financial) or generalist (eg administrative systems) matters so that the academic colleagues are able to more effectively undertake their own duties and responsibilities within the unit.

The next section considers all the findings presented above in the context of the literature from which this conceptual framework emerged.

Discussion of findings

These findings relating to how the senior administrator role is perceived by the post holders and others demonstrate that where the role is perceived to be important to the

work of the academic unit, and where there is a movement towards closer working with academic colleagues, then the post holders are generally perceived to be undertaking a professional role. It is interesting to note how influential communication is between the stakeholders and post holders in the development of effective working practices and views of professionalisation. This was also a key feature in the previous two conceptual frameworks relating to role definition and responsibilities where it emerged from the data that it is very important for the post holder to be able to define and disseminate their role and its duties to those with whom they are working. Perceptions are built on views developed during periods of communication and interaction between the different stakeholders and the post holder, and this third conceptual framework considers this aspect more fully.

Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) noted that there were different “processes of professionalisation” (p470) and these are reflected in this research where it has become apparent that professionalisation is different things to different people and a combination of these different aspects raises the perception of the role in relation to its professional status. From their findings they identified a number of aspects of professionalisation within university administration that have been reflected in this research including intellectual and interpersonal skills and sector knowledge.

Middlehurst (2000) cites skill levels as being a key aspect of professionalisation apparent in university administration, although Lauwerys (2002) later commented that it was unlikely that this could become a profession like medicine or law where there is a unique body of knowledge setting people working in these areas apart as professionals. The case studies in this research support the concept that the post

holders have high levels of both knowledge and skills that are relevant to their work and that where they use these confidently to inform and support their colleagues and other stakeholders with whom they work, more effective working relationships are established:

I think we are here to provide support to academic staff that are more and more and more under siege with the amount of work they have to do and the amount of administration they have to do ... (C1/8 PH 138-141)

Bassnett (2005) noted that these changes in higher education require administrators to be ever more professional in their ability to provide advice and guidance to academic colleagues. This is further reflected in this research data where there appears to be some development of a more encompassing university administrator role that has a level of recognition at national level.

The respondents in the first case study were strongly focused on the need for qualifications for someone to be seen as professional. This is supported by the professional body (AUA, 2004) through their professional, postgraduate qualification in university administration which is accredited by the Open University. It is arguable whether this qualification addresses the issues raised by Lauwreys (2002) in relation to university administration being a profession with a unique body of knowledge, because each senior administrator will utilise knowledge from a wide range of sources throughout their work. However, it reflects Gornitzka and Larsen's (2004) identification of the importance of a "common cognitive basis" (p470) as part of the professionalisation process. It should be noted that each institution in this case study, and even each academic unit in the first one, has different requirements of the post holder. As these reflect a common legislative and funding framework, albeit with local interpretation and implementation, it could be argued that senior university

administration in the UK is not a profession as there is no unique body of knowledge developing that is the same for all practitioners. There is evidence in this research that both the post holders and their managers are keen to see relevant qualifications being developed that support the post holder in their work and appropriate continuing professional development being undertaken to develop the role within the local context despite the variety of challenges that they face.

It is widely recognised in the literature (Bassnett, 2005; Hare and Hare, 2002; HEFCE, 2005) that the senior administrator role is essential to the success of the academic unit and the wider university in the current fast-changing environment of higher education in the UK. The evidence from both case study institutions supports this view and further develops it in the context of specialist and generalist administrative responsibilities that are designed to support and enhance particular aspects of the unit's business. The data demonstrate a strong emphasis on the importance of the advisory aspects of the senior administrator role where the post holders are able to demonstrate their high levels of expertise and professionalism in a proactive manner.

The importance of the role combined with its perceived professionalism is seen by many (Dobson and Conway, 2003; Whitchurch, 2004) to provide an environment that could resolve elements of tension or conflict between the administrator and their academic colleagues, especially in the context of competing for resources or perceived power. This is more likely as the nature of the administrator's work develops to the point that the boundaries with those of the academic become less well defined (Bassnett, 2005). The data obtained during this research demonstrate that all

the stakeholders involved consider collaborative working to be essential to the success of both the senior administrator and the academic roles. One post holder commented that their head of unit had:

... a view on the role of the administration in this [unit], [the head] does recognise the professional administrator and the whole business of working together. (C1/7 PH 389-390)

There is a belief in partnership working that supports Duke's (2002) view that it is vital that effective internal networking strategies are developed in order for all university colleagues to be able to respond effectively to the demands being placed on them by the every-changing demands of the higher education sector. This again is reflected in the findings of this research with one senior manager commenting that:

"I need [these senior administrators] to get out there and working with colleagues across the sector." (C1/1 SM 13-14)

Furthermore, there is reflection on how important it is for the post holders to consider the effectiveness of their work in the wider context of the sector. Again this does lead to the realisation that university administration appears to be developing some of the characteristics of a profession in that post holders in different institutions are using similar areas of knowledge to discharge their duties and responsibilities whilst working collaboratively with their colleagues.

Summary of discussion

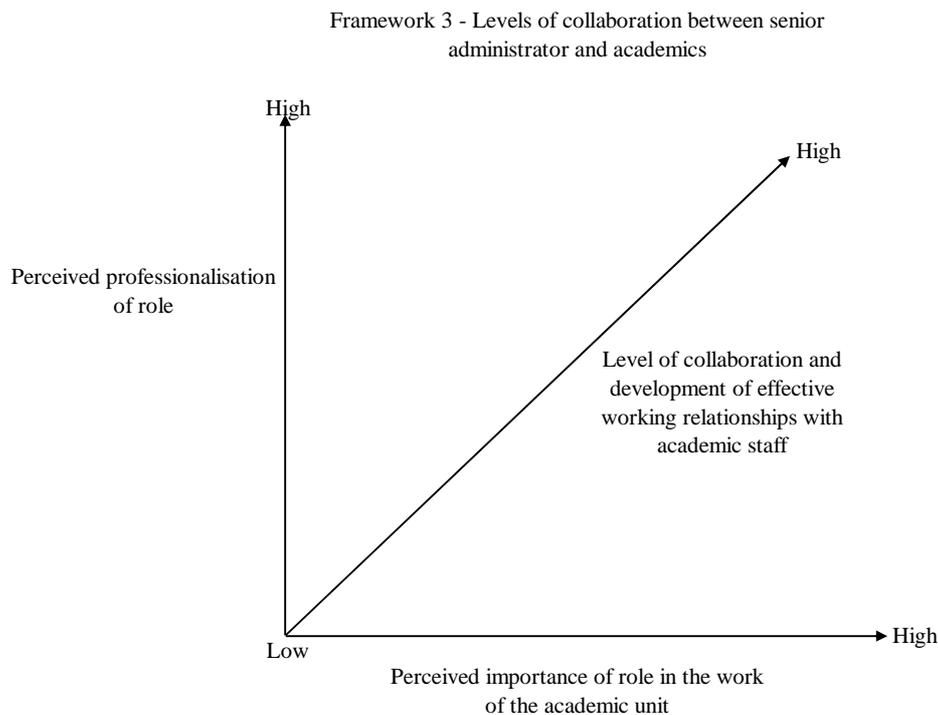
This third section of the research has demonstrated that the work of the senior administrator is becoming more and more important within the academic unit because of the need for universities to respond to legislative, regulatory and procedural requirements of the higher education sector in the UK. This is resulting in the need

for the post holders to be able to work more closely with their academic colleagues than ever before in many areas. This is resulting in a growing perception that this is a professional role and this has been supported partly by the development of a professional qualification by the AUA.

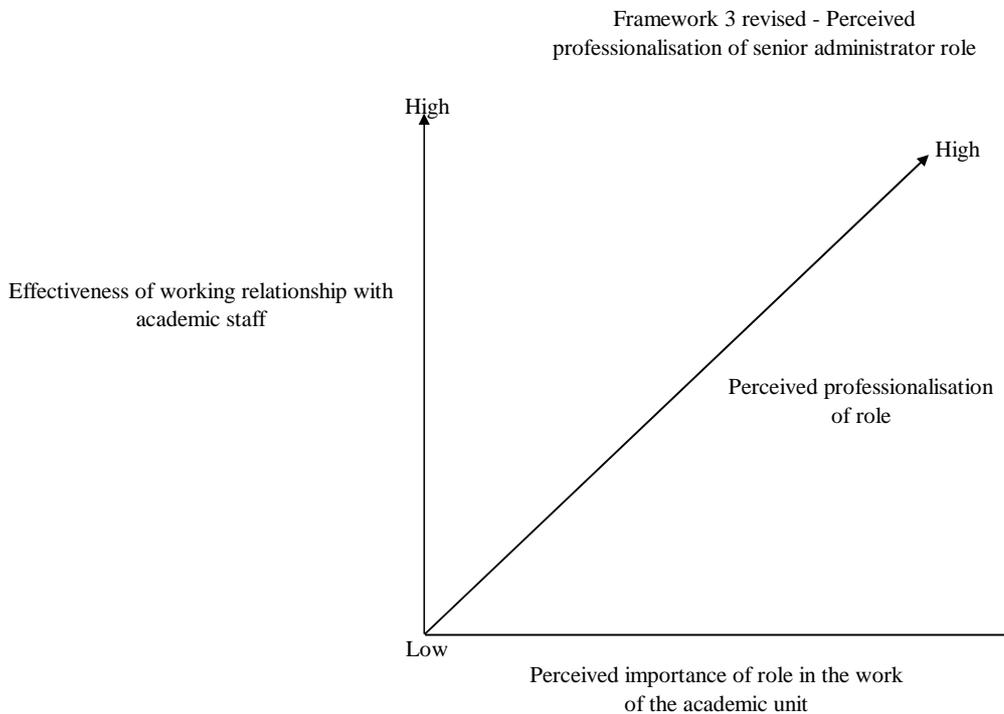
The next section considers how these findings impact on the initial conceptual framework that emerged from the literature reviewed.

Conceptual framework three revisited

This section reviews the initial framework (below) that emerged from the literature which suggests that the senior administrator works more effectively with academic colleagues where there is a stronger perception of the role having a professional status within the organisation and the work is seen as important to the work of the unit.



The findings from this research appear to show a link between each of these three perceptions held of senior administrators being 1) professional, 2) having roles seen as important to the unit and 3) needing to work collaboratively with their colleagues. However this link does appear to have a different focus from that implied in the initial framework. The data show that where the senior managers and head of units perceive the role to be important to the work of the unit and the post holders work effectively with their colleagues, then there is a greater perception of the professionalisation of the role. This is based on the interpersonal nature of how perceptions are developed and held by people which, in this instance, is based on how the post holders are seen to undertake their duties and implement the responsibilities of their role within the unit.



Following on from the first and second conceptual frameworks that considered the influence on the role definition processes and how the role is actually defined by what it is responsible for, this section demonstrates that these first two aspects of the role are necessary for this third one to take place. All stakeholders need to be aware of the reasons why the role was created and what it is responsible for in order to be able to develop effective working relationships with the post holder. There is evidence that demonstrates the importance of communication at each of these stages, but it is most important at this final stage where the interpersonal nature of the role is the paramount factor in its success or failure within the academic unit.

In the first case study the respondents referred to the importance of the perceptions held by senior managers and the head of unit in enabling the role to be seen positively by colleagues in the academic unit. This is also reflected in the documentation of the second case study where the role is described as being very important to the success of the administration of the unit whilst potentially having an impact on every member of the unit's staff in some aspect of their work. It is in this importance and collaboration that the perceptions of the stakeholders are raised in respect of their opinions of the professionalisation of the role. This also includes as secondary influences, the qualifications held by the post holder and continuing professional development undertaken to support their work at a local level. The personal implementation of the role by the post holder and their attitude to the work is key to raising the perceptions and consequently the effectiveness of collaboration with stakeholders.

This third framework has been supported by the research undertaken and by the outcomes of the consideration of the previous two conceptual frameworks, and demonstrates that as the senior administrator role in these two institutions is becoming more important to the work of the academic unit there is a stronger perception that the post holders are developing a professional role that is particular to their knowledge base and expertise.

An overall summary of the findings is given in the next section to draw all these aspects together in the context of the research questions posed at the start of this research.

SUMMARY OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

As already demonstrated in the presentation and discussion of the findings for each initial conceptual framework, this research has largely supported the views held in the literature, although the foci of the initial conceptual frameworks have changed in light of the evidence obtained. It has also provided some insights to the research questions posed at the outset and each of these is considered in turn now.

Research question 1

By what process has the role of academic unit senior administrator been defined?

- 1a) How far has it been a central university creation?
- 1b) How far has it been developed by the head of the academic unit?
- 1c) How far has the post holder been involved in the process of definition?

The data have demonstrated that there can be different influences on the processes by which the role is defined and that these can be different at different times within the same institution.

In the first case study the role has been created centrally by the institution's senior managers; however, the heads of units are members of that senior team and are directly involved in its development. In the second case the institutional senior managers are not involved directly in the development of the role other than by

inference with the head of unit being a member of the senior management team and other academic units already having similar roles.

There are two common influences at each case study though and these are that the head of the unit directs the implementation of the role to meet their perceived business needs at local level and the post holder strongly influences the operationalisation of the role within that remit set by the head. It is interesting to note how strong this influence is in the two very different institutions investigated, with the heads of unit taking a 'hands on' approach to defining how the role should be implemented.

Finally, the post holders themselves appears to have a very considerable influence over the actual operationalisation of the implementation of their role. They are key to ensuring the responsibilities and duties undertaken meet the needs of both the unit and the university. Despite the changes at the first institution with the role definition process having been moved from the head of unit to the institutional senior management team, all post holders felt that their own influence on how the role is undertaken as the most significant factor in how it is received by colleagues and hence how effective it can be within the unit.

Research question 2

How is the role itself defined in relation to duties and responsibilities?

- 2a) How clearly defined is the area of responsibility?
- 2b) How wide is the range of duties and responsibilities undertaken?
- 2c) How far were these duties and responsibilities once the realm of the academic staff?

The data have demonstrated the importance of clear role definition because of the wide range of duties undertaken within its remit. In both cases the job description is perceived to be essential to the clarity of the definition of the role for implementation and development purposes; however, communication is seen as the key activity that enables the stakeholders to understand that definition and for the role to evolve and develop.

There are two types of senior administrator identified in the first case study, those of specialist and generalist; however, it is noted that both are involved in a very wide range of activities that have been defined in general terms on the job description. This is reflected in the second case where the role is largely generalist, although it does have some specialist responsibilities.

In both cases much of the senior administrator role is to support the head of unit and other academic colleagues by undertaking activities that were once their responsibility in order to enable academic staff to spend less time on administrative activities for which they may not have the most appropriate levels of expertise or engagement. It is also interesting to note that the second case study unit has specifically created the post to relieve particular academic staff of a range of administrative tasks.

Research question 3

How is the role perceived by the different stakeholders (post holders, academic unit heads and senior managers)?

In relation to:

- 3a) the importance of the role to the core business of the unit;
- 3b) the nature of the working relationship between the unit senior administrator and academic colleagues;
- 3c) and the professionalisation of the role.

The practice of re-assigning areas of responsibility to senior administrators from academic staff as found in the data appears to be supporting the increased importance of the role within the academic unit. Both cases report activities that have a significant impact on the successful running of the unit both operationally and on specialist levels such as financial management.

This growing importance has led to the development of different working relationships with academic staff whereby there is a stronger reliance on close working and communication. Both cases cite the importance of the post holder to the head of unit for the provision of advice and guidance on administrative matters relating to the overall management of the unit. Furthermore, as the institutional and national requirements for academic staff to develop high level teaching skills and to undertake world-class research increase, it is becoming more important for them to be relieved of as much administration as possible to free up sufficient time to fulfil these

obligations through the development of working partnerships with the senior administrators.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS SUMMARY

The original view that emerged from the literature is that senior administrator roles are ill-defined (Gumport and Pusser, 1995), very wide-ranging in the responsibilities they undertake (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004), growing in aspects that were previously those of academic colleagues or the head of unit (Hare and Hare, 2002), and becoming more professionalised in recent years (Bassnett, 2005). Dobson and Conway (2003) note how important it is for administrators to be able to clarify how their work contributes to the overall work of the academic unit in order for them to be able to develop strong working relationships with academic staff. These opinions led to the development of the three conceptual frameworks on which the presentation of the findings and analysis of data have been considered in this chapter.

This research has provided data that have supported many of the views expressed in the literature and many aspects of the initial conceptual frameworks and how these have been refined as discussed earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, it has added to this body of knowledge by demonstrating how there is now a move towards quite close definition of the role at three levels within some universities, whilst retaining the broad remit of responsibility that has been a characteristic of this type of role in the past.

It has been interesting to note how important the job description appears to be in operationalising the role and providing a structure on which to base the

implementation of a newly created role. This more clearly defined role is now undertaking responsibilities that were previously those of the head of unit or other senior academic staff, and as such requires the development of more and more effective working relationships between the administrator and academic colleagues. This appears to be having the result that there is a growing perception amongst stakeholders that the role is becoming more complex and professionalised, with post holders undertaking professional development activities to support their work.

The next chapter, Conclusions and Recommendations, presents an overall picture of the conclusions drawn in relation to the main aims of the research, an evaluation of the research design and how effective it has been in providing data to answer the research questions and support or challenge the conceptual frameworks that emerged from the literature review. It also presents some recommendations for current and aspiring post holders, heads of academic units, the institutions they work in, and the professional body which supports them. There is also some consideration for further research in this area and how it could support further the development of the senior administrator role. The thesis concludes with a section of final reflections from myself and some potential users on the recommendations made and the usefulness of this research.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter considers the findings from this research in the context of the main aims of the investigation that emerged from the literature review and how it has contributed to this body of knowledge. It also considers how effective the research design has been in enabling the evaluation of the data to generate information that contributes to the general understanding of the role of senior administrators in academic units in UK universities.

In addition to contributing to what is known about this role, the aim is to be able to provide information and recommendations for institutions, academic units, the professional body (AUA), and current and aspiring senior administrators on how to define, implement and develop these posts. The findings do support some recommendations and these are outlined in the relevant section below.

These findings have also generated some ideas for further research in this area and these are considered briefly in the third section of this chapter, with some suggestions as to how they may be undertaken and how they a) have emerged from this research and b) may contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this area.

The final section of this chapter considers reflections on the research findings and recommendations by some potential users. Also, as part of the purpose for undertaking this research was to support my own personal and professional

development I reflect on undertaking the investigation, how the findings have impacted on my own professional practice and how I anticipate my future career growth.

The next section presents an evaluation of the research design and considers how far it has provided evidence that answers the main aims of this investigation.

Evaluation of research design

Reflecting the main aims of the research which were to expand understanding of 1) how the senior administrator role has come about, 2) what post holders are responsible for and 3) how the role is perceived, this research has provided some interesting findings using a case study approach. The previous chapter considers in detail how far the research had provided insights to the questions posed and summarises the findings in relation to the literature and emergent conceptual frameworks.

The case study design has provided rich data from interviews with three groups of stakeholders in the first institution and a personal viewpoint as presented in a research diary complemented by documentary evidence in the second. Interestingly, all of the respondents in the first case thanked me for undertaking the study as it had encouraged them to give some direct consideration of these issues which they expressed as being very important to their own professional practice and the development of the role in their own contexts. Some further reflections from potential users on the conclusions and recommendations arising from this research are presented in the relevant section at the end of this chapter.

With the second case study, the inclusion of my implementation of a new senior administrator role encouraged me to reflect on the issues surrounding its operationalisation and supported a more structured, organised approach which may not have been the case if I had not been undertaking this research. Again this supports both the decision to include this as part of the overall research design and also the data collection method that promoted an element of self-reflection during the data creation and gathering processes.

The data gathered from both case studies supported effective analysis that enabled some insights to the research questions to emerge. With the second case study it might have been even more effective if the research diary had been structured to record data under each of the research questions rather than in a free text format as chosen. However, whilst this would have made analysis easier, and may have provided more information, the data that were obtained have provided sufficient evidence for the scope and aims of this research. Even so, the comments made do quite closely reflect the areas being investigated, which may be a result of their importance to the implementation of the role. However, it should not be overlooked that there may have been an unconscious, or even conscious action in endeavouring to include comments that would be useful to this research.

Overall I believe that this research design and the data collection methods could be utilised in other institutional settings as a follow up to this research without any major modifications (except perhaps for the research diary being more firmly structured). Inevitably the results would be unique to each situation and time context in which the

research was undertaken, but they would enable the researcher to derive findings that could be compared and contrasted with those from this investigation to develop further understanding of the senior administrator role. If this was a longitudinal study there may be the opportunity to investigate how perceptions change over time and what influences were brought to bear on those views.

Contribution to knowledge

The literature supports a need for further investigation into how the administrator role has changed in relation to its academic context (Gumport and Pusser, 1995) which is echoed by Whitchurch (2004) who supports the view that the roles are actually changing in response to changes in the way the sector manages academic activity. From my research the findings demonstrate that for both case study institutions the role has been developed and refined in order to provide high level, professional administrative support to the head of the academic unit, a purpose identified by Hare and Hare (2002). However, in these case studies the post holders are also having some impact on the overall business of the university, either by reporting to an institutional senior manager in the first, or being involved with cross-institutional working groups for administrative development as in the second. In both cases the main influence on the implementation of the role is the head of unit; although, it is recognised that the post holder has a high level of influence over its operationalisation and practical development to meet local and institutional needs.

The duties and responsibilities undertaken by the post holders vary quite considerably and can be of a specialist or generalist nature dependent upon the definition of the role as set out in the job description. In both case studies the importance of the job

description in the operationalisation of the role is evident in supporting the post holder undertaking the relevant responsibilities either in a prescribed way (Berger, 1963) or as a "... collection of rights and duties." (Jenkins, 2004). Irrespective of the specialist or generalist focus, these responsibilities have been found to be wide ranging, a feature also identified in the literature (AUA, 2004; Szekeres, 2004).

This research shows that there can be common activities for both specialist and generalist roles where post holders focus on the provision of advice and guidance to colleagues and students, analysis of management information to inform business planning, and relieving senior academic colleagues of significant administrative responsibilities in order to free them up to concentrate on management, teaching and research activities (AUA, 2004). This is a special feature of university administration and leadership where specialists and generalists can both have job descriptions that show similar areas of responsibility although the career paths and qualifications of the post holders have been and will be very different.

This research has shown that the perceptions of the role and its incumbent are heavily influenced by how effectively and consistently its responsibilities are understood amongst all stakeholders. From its initial inception to local operationalisation it is essential that all stakeholders, including the post holders themselves, have a clear understanding of why the role has been created and what its responsibilities are, otherwise misunderstandings and frustrations can develop that hinder its effectiveness and future development (Szekeres, 2006). It is the all encompassing nature of this need for effective communication that seems to be omitted in some cases, where there are colleagues within the unit who are not readily aware of the areas of responsibility

undertaken by the senior administrator and the level of authority that has been delegated. By improving this communication, and developing more effective working relationships between the senior administrator and their academic colleagues, greater efficiency and productivity may be obtained.

The literature considers the gradual professionalisation of the role (Bassnett, 2005) and the findings from this research support this perception in the context of the level of knowledge and expertise required to undertake the assigned responsibilities, the qualifications required to apply for a post and the necessity for continuing professional development to support the post holders (AUA, 2004; Dobson and Conway, 2003). There is some concern expressed that there does not appear to be a readily identifiable qualification for generalist administrators, such as there is for finance specialists; however, the AUA does provide this and, again, more effective communication and recognition would help to breakdown this barrier.

An aspect that has not featured significantly in the literature is the need for commitment to continuing professional development activity; especially as it contributes significantly to creating perceptions of professionalisation at both case study institutions. When undertaken in a structured way, with planning and forethought, senior administrators can be equipped better to cope with the ever changing demands of the role.

This research, which is based on the literature, has contributed to further understanding of the role by identifying three frameworks that 1) illustrate that the role has developed largely in response to the needs of the head of the unit, 2) that the

range of responsibilities, combined with how well defined and understood these are by academic colleagues, has resulted in a greater likelihood that the post holder is undertaking activities that were previously those of academic colleagues, and 3) that there is a greater perception of the professionalisation of the role when effective working relationships are achieved and the responsibilities of the role are believed to be important to the unit.

The findings have thus provided a basis on which to make some recommendations to universities, the professional body and current and aspiring post holders which are outlined in the next section of this chapter. Indications of where further research may be undertaken have also arisen and these are considered later in this chapter.

Recommendations

In addition to the aim of developing further the understanding of the senior administrator role, it was expected that this research would enable some recommendations to be made to inform and potentially improve professional practice. As these recommendations are specific to each of the frameworks on which the research questions were based, each one is considered separately below, with a subsequent summary of recommendations for each stakeholder group. It is recognised that institutions may already be implementing some or many of these suggestions; however, I believe that this research has demonstrated that there needs to be a coherent, planned approach to the creation, implementation and development of the senior administrator role to maximise its effectiveness and the efficiency of the post holder.

Senior administrator role definition

Defining the role of senior administrator in an academic unit is one that has many aspects that range from strategic development at institutional level through to the operationalisation of the responsibilities of the role. This research has shown that Hare and Hare's (2002) view that the role is essential to enable the head of unit to function more effectively is reflected in other institutions as well. Furthermore, there appears to be a need for clarity in the definition process so that senior managers, heads of units, post holders and other colleagues and stakeholders have a clear understanding of how and why the role has been created and what can be expected of its incumbent.

This leads to the recommendations that the development process be as transparent as possible, whether it be at institutional or unit level, and that an appropriate opportunity is provided for a wide range of stakeholders to comment on the proposals for the creation of, and any revisions to the senior administrator role. Where the role is part of an overall institutional strategy it is also important that the heads of academic units and their staff are aware of the strategy, how it contributes to the overall strategic direction of the university and what is the long term vision for the administrative function and senior unit administrators in particular.

The head of the academic unit has a responsibility to ensure that all unit staff members are aware of any developments with new roles of this type or any changes to current ones. They must work very closely with the post holders and have the most to contribute to, and benefit from, their contribution to the unit's work, so it is very important that there is a clear understanding between the two as to the range and

nature of the responsibilities assigned to the senior administrator and what is (and is not) expected of them. Induction, probationary review and routine annual appraisals (including a professional development plan) are useful strategies in this process and should be fully utilised by both parties to support this (there are also other benefits of these tools that will be addressed below). Furthermore, induction for new unit staff can be a useful way of ensuring that a clear understanding of the role is developed across the unit through providing time for new colleagues to meet the post holder and get to know when, how and why they will be working together in future.

Undertaking responsibilities previously assigned to academics

This is becoming a key feature of the role as demands are placed on academic colleagues for research and teaching that prevent them from undertaking as much administration as in the past. This research has shown that where people understand what the senior administrator is responsible for and can see that the range of responsibilities is coherent and meaningful in the context of the unit's work, then academic colleagues appear to be more willing to relinquish administrative responsibilities they had previously undertaken themselves. This is seen much more as a supportive, facilitating role (HEFCE, 2004) that enables and supports academic activity. This re-assignment of responsibilities should also enable heads of units to take a longer-term, more strategic approach to business development and change rather than only having time to focus on the short-term management of the unit.

The recommendations under this area relate significantly to the local unit and to promoting a full understanding of the role and how it contributes to the overall work of the unit. It is important that this also includes the post holder as there may have

been a tendency in the past for senior administrators to be unclear themselves about what their responsibilities are (Dobson and Conway, 2003) and how their role fits into the unit structure. However, a fundamental basis for the recognition of the role within the unit should be established and this can be aided by the senior administrator being a member of the unit's senior management group, relevant operational groups within the unit, and chairing other group(s) relevant to direct aspects of their role (eg marketing). This research has demonstrated that where the post holder is seen to be taking an active role in the management of the administrative work of the unit, academic colleagues are more likely to accept them as complementing the academic work of the unit as well. Furthermore, appropriate line management of administrative staff by the post holder is seen to promote the development of a team working environment and gives colleagues a single point of contact for any workload or personnel related issues that might arise. This also supports the development of more efficient and effective working practices amongst the administrative team in the unit and enables professional development plans to be drawn up to improve individual skills and develop new ones to meet the needs of the unit.

At institutional level the recommendation is that the senior administrator represents their unit on all appropriate central committees, steering groups, and working parties that are directly relevant to their areas of responsibility (eg administrative systems development, marketing, timetabling), taking over from academic colleagues if necessary, to ensure that institutional decisions are informed by experienced, professional administrators from academic units. This will also enable the post holders to expand their network within the university (Duke, 2002), become more readily identified with their areas of professional expertise as a member of the

university community (McNye, 2005) and also widen their sphere of contribution and knowledge gathering.

Perceptions of the senior administrator role

As discussed in the previous chapter, it has become apparent from this research that it is necessary for the role to be clearly defined and the post holder to be undertaking a coherent range of responsibilities that are recognised as being important to the work of the unit (more frequently previously those of academic colleagues) for the post holder to be well perceived by other stakeholders. The research has demonstrated that the way the person in post interacts with others, the qualifications held and the continuing professional development undertaken all contribute to the perceived professionalisation of the role (Bassnett, 2005; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; Lauwreys, 2002).

In response to this, the recommendations under this area are focussed on the recruitment of appropriately qualified and experienced people to the role and their ongoing professional development once in post. New and continuing senior administrators should be proactively encouraged to undertake relevant professional development activities, and to develop new skills as new areas of work emerge (eg new software installations, new business initiatives). This can be undertaken as part of their probationary review activities and ongoing appraisal discussions as mentioned above. Responsibility for this lies with both the institution and the academic unit. Without an effective professional development strategy at university level, an individual unit may find it very difficult to provide and/or support the development identified as required, and without support from the academic unit the post holder

may encounter obstacles to accessing appropriate opportunities. At unit level, the head of unit and post holder should be committed proactively to continuing professional development for themselves and their colleagues, demonstrating its value to improving the quality and efficiency of the work of the unit.

Summary of recommendations

The implementation of these recommendations will help to develop further the perception that senior administrators in academic units are professional administrators with high levels of expertise and skill, whose work is essential to the successful running of the unit, the institution in which it is situated and the wider higher education sector in the UK (HEFCE, 2004). To summarise, the recommendations made for each of the stakeholder groups are:

Institution

- To periodically and transparently review institutional and academic unit human resource and business management strategies to develop the most appropriate administrative structure for the institution and unit.
- To provide relevant professional development programmes and opportunities for all current and aspiring university administrators to support and develop careers that both meet the needs of the institution and wider higher education sector.

Academic unit

- To develop local induction programmes for all staff that clearly communicate the senior administrator's role, its responsibilities and how the post holder is expected to interact amongst the members of the unit.

- To establish the role of senior administrator as an important one within the overall management structure of the unit through membership of the unit senior management team, involvement in relevant committees and other groups in the unit, and through line management of the administrative staff.

Professional body

- To provide a qualification structure that encourages continued development towards higher levels of professional accreditation (possibly through collaboration with universities and/or other relevant professional bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators, the Chartered Institute of Marketing, or one of the professional accounting bodies).
- To provide professional development events to support the development of communication skills in the context of collaborative working with academic colleagues.

Individual administrators

- To undertake study for relevant professional qualifications and professional development activities available through their own institution, other universities and through the professional body.
- To proactively engage in the institution's probation and appraisal/review process to structure and progress their career.
- To develop communication skills to support sustained improvements to professional practice and working relationships.

These recommendations should not necessarily require high levels of resource investment for a basic level of implementation, and indeed there may well be many

elements of them already in existence at each of these levels. The key is that they are undertaken in a structured way so that each element is complemented by enabling easy access and appropriate levels of support. Professional development activity for all staff including senior administrators should be recognised by their line managers and colleagues as being of value and which can be demonstrated through improved execution of duties.

The next section outlines some feedback on these recommendations received from potential users of this research.

Feedback from potential users

In order to establish how acceptable these recommendations might be, a number of people were approached to provide feedback and make comments based on their own professional expertise. The people approached had not previously been involved in this research in any way and were chosen because of their accessibility and current professional status which made them potential users of the recommendations being presented. These people were: 1) a Head of Staff Development in a university, 2) a current senior administrator with many years experience, 3) a fairly new administrator who aspires to the senior administrator role and 4) a representative of the Staff Development Committee of the AUA. Each person was provided with a copy of the Executive Summary of this thesis (Appendix 4) in advance of an informal discussion at which brief notes were taken to aid subsequent consideration within this thesis. Their views are first presented individually dependent upon the group they represent and then reviewed collectively in the context of the aims of this research which were outlined in the Introduction chapter of this thesis.

Institutional senior management (Head of Staff Development)

There was strong recognition that in an ideal world these recommendations for the institution were commendable. However, there was a prerequisite that a human resource strategy existed and that it was accepted by the senior managers and heads of academic units. The comment was made that this is not always the case, and that where a strategy does exist it may not always have the support and implementation desired. It was recognised that there was a stronger tendency to evolution, not revolution, when revising and improving administrative structure.

Professional development is accepted as being essential to all staff, not just the senior administrator and that this should include effective local and institutional induction for all new staff. It was suggested that this recommendation was particularly important and an area where improvements could be made relatively easily. This could contribute directly to attempts to improve communication between different categories of staff, and provide a basis for ongoing and improved working relationships. It was suggested that a mentoring scheme may contribute to achieving this recommendation.

Current senior administrator

This person commented that much of the research and its recommendation resonated with their own experience. It was noted that a characteristic of these roles is that they have job descriptions that are so wide ranging that they become less achievable and more and more responsibilities are added as they come to light. This carries with it a warning that post holders are in danger of failing to work effectively if their tasks do not form a coherent pattern of responsibility.

The recommendation that induction programmes be used to promote communication of areas of responsibility was welcomed. In the context of the individual proactively engaging with appraisal/review, the current administrator suggested that the role should have “an effective support structure” and be provided with “clear and measurable targets which are regularly monitored”. This clarity is seen as essential to support professional development and the development of the ability to evaluate personal professional performance.

Aspiring senior administrator

This person welcomed all of the recommendations, commenting on the importance of communication being seen as a channel and not a one-way, information providing activity. Appraisal and review are seen to be key to successful career planning for all staff, not just administrators. However, they make the suggestion that these need to be supported by knowledgeable and experienced line managers who encourage appropriate development to meet personal and academic unit needs. This will then help to develop an environment where senior administrators as perceived to have a professional status within the unit through knowledge and expertise and the ability to earn the respect of their colleagues.

There was agreement that the AUA could benefit from some links with other professional bodies, especially where generalist roles have some specialist areas attached to them (eg marketing or human resource management).

Representative of the AUA Staff Development Committee

Generally these recommendations are well received and supported by this person, especially in the context of continuing professional development to support skills improvement and career planning. Again the development of communication skills, and effective working relationships with academic colleagues, are seen to be critical to the successful implementation of this role.

However, the recommendation that links be established with other professional bodies was not well received. The comments made were that most administrative roles (including the senior administrator) are generalist in nature, and if they are not they are very specific (eg finance) where a particular professional qualification is more appropriate. The main attraction of the AUA to its members is perceived to be its generalist nature, where support and development opportunities are provided to meet this need by being broad based and rooted in professional practice. Consequently, the association currently had no plans to develop formal links with other bodies.

User feedback in context of research aims

This research set out to develop further the general understanding of the role of senior administrators in academic units, building on existing published research and making recommendations to contribute to the development of the role and its effectiveness within the local and institutional contexts. By discussing these recommendations with potential users it has been possible to obtain feedback on how realistic they are and whether they are likely to be embraced by institutions and individuals.

Supporting the findings of this research and the views expressed in the literature reviewed, there is a consensus that the work of the senior administrator is wide ranging and complex and that the roles have emerged and developed largely to support the heads of units and other academic colleagues. There is agreement that it is essential for colleagues to understand what these responsibilities are for the post holder to be able to execute their role.

Communication of these responsibilities to relevant stakeholders is seen as being essential for the successful implementation of the role and comprehension of its responsibilities. Interestingly communication is seen to take different forms that include induction, appraisal, interpersonal communication skills and the development of effective channels that are not just one-way flows of information. All of these are believed to underpin the ability to build more effective working relationships with academic colleagues. Furthermore, this then is believed to contribute to the perception that the senior administrator undertakes a professional role, demonstrating professional characteristics of providing advice and guidance on relevant matters.

The development of appropriate strategies at institutional level is perceived to be effective only where there is wide acceptance and implementation of them, otherwise the development of administrative structures and staff development practices will become more reactive than proactive, with a greater burden being placed on local units than might be desired.

Overall, these potential users felt that these recommendations were relevant to the current environment of administration in higher education and, if implemented, would

make significant improvements in professional practice and more effective working with academic colleagues. The next section of this chapter goes on to consider where further research could be undertaken to build on this investigation and the existing body of knowledge.

Further research

Further research suggestions have emerged from two main sources; 1) the implementation of a new senior administrator role and 2) the possibility of developing further understanding of the role in a wider context.

In relation to both case studies, the senior administrator role that is the focus of this research was newly defined at the time of the research and a number of the respondents commented that they did not know how successful the changes would be over time. Consequently, the first area for further research would be to return to the institutions at a later date using a similar case study research design, undertake more interviews and keep another research diary to find out how effective the role has been, what changes have happened to what was anticipated at the time of the initial research and how the respondents think the role may develop in future. This could be further enhanced by evaluating the effectiveness of the recommendations outlined above that were in place at the time of the initial investigation and which had been implemented since. It would also be interesting to incorporate an investigation into any changes in student recruitment numbers during the intervening period between the first and any subsequent investigation, and how this might have affected the development and operationalisation of the senior administrator role (HEFCE, 2006).

The second aspect of further research relates to expanding the investigation to more institutions and developing a wider knowledge-base to further refine the recommendations made in this thesis. For this I would envisage undertaking a large-scale survey of members of the AUA specifically focusing on those working in academic units and what their experiences are in relation to the main research findings and conceptual frameworks. This could use a social survey design with an online questionnaire to support a large response (from several thousand members) and effective statistical data analysis. Questions could also be included relating to the areas identified in the recommendations above to establish how far these are already being undertaken, how widely accessed they are, and how valuable they are perceived to be.

Inevitably there are many more areas for potential research relating to professional university administrators in academic units, including and investigation into how senior administrators develop and use authority and power in the implementation of their role. However, space does not permit further suggestions except to say that this remains an under-researched area in the UK and as such it is an exciting time for those seeking to undertake investigations that are aimed at improving both administrative practice and the career development of practising administrators within academic units in UK universities.

Final reflections

At the start of this research my title ‘Partners not competitors: the developing role of the senior administrator in academic units in UK universities’ reflected my personal, professional experience in the sector where I had observed some tensions between

administrative and academic colleagues. However, during the four years over which I have undertaken this investigation, I have personally perceived a move towards stronger and more equal working relationships between these parties as the demands placed upon both have increased and they are far more reliant upon each other to fulfil the responsibilities and expectations assigned to each stakeholder group.

The process of undertaking this research has provided me with a greater insight into the importance of this role within the academic unit and the importance of research into higher education administration. Furthermore, by developing my own research skills I have been able to understand more effectively some of the issues surrounding research activity. This has resulted in me feeling more comfortable with my abilities to be able to build more equal relationships with academic colleagues that demonstrate this shift in status. During my interview for the new senior administrator post great emphasis was placed on my doctoral studies, how they would impact on my professional practice and how I thought they might inform the development of university administration on a wider basis.

The frameworks that emerged from the literature and the analysis of the findings from this research have provided the foundations on which I have been able to make some recommendations that I hope will support further the understanding and development of the role and the perceptions held of its professional status in the sector. I believe it is significant that these recommendations encompass a number of the stakeholder groups as this appears to reflect the changing environment of higher education where there is a growing need for a senior administrator to be able to work effectively within different networks at different times or concurrently. It also demonstrates that there is

a strong need for these different parties to be able to work together to share best practice and develop a skills and knowledge base that is constantly being reviewed and updated to be able to respond quickly to legislative and regulatory demands placed upon them.

To conclude, the role of the senior administrator in academic units in UK universities is becoming more and more important to ensure that the legislative and regulatory requirements placed on higher education, and the high service standards expected by students, government and industry, are achieved effectively and efficiently. The development of closer working relationships with academic colleagues is resulting in a more accepting culture of collaboration and sharing. As a result, an alternative title for this thesis could be:

‘Partners not servants: the development of the professional, senior administrator role as a significant participator in, and contributor to, the work of the academic unit in UK universities in the 21st century’

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Statement of research intent

Request to conduct an interview with a Senior Manager/Head of Department/Post holder

Dear (*name*)

I am currently working towards a Doctorate in Education (EdD) at the University of Birmingham and my research focuses on the role of Departmental Administrators in UK universities.

As we have already discussed, you have kindly agreed to allow me to discuss this with you on XXXXXX at XXXXX. Our discussion should last no more than one hour and will be recorded to enable future transcription.

The conversation will focus on the role of Senior Administrators in academic units in your institution, its interaction with the central administration of the university and how administrative effectiveness and efficiency are affected by the existence of the post.

The questions I will be asking are:

1. Why were the posts created when there were already central administrative departments?
2. What are the main responsibilities of the role of Departmental Finance Administrator in your university?
3. How does the role add value to the overall effectiveness of the administration of the university?
4. What is your vision for the role of Departmental Administrator in the future?

The interview transcript will be forwarded to you for approval prior to data analysis, and you may correct any inaccuracies as you wish. You may also advise me if you feel that you need to withdraw a response or the whole interview after it has taken place.

The transcript, data analysis and thesis will make no reference to the identity of interviewees, the specific post held, or the name of the institution they work for. All data will be held securely and confidentially in accordance with standard practice in educational research.

I am pleased that you are able to help me with this and look forward to meeting you on XXXXXX at XXXXX.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Margaret Lagor

Appendix 2 – Extract of interview transcript

EXTRACT

... What I'd like is your perceptions and feelings about the role of senior administrator here in the [name of school] and within the context of the university. Now, for the purposes of the discussion a departmental administrator is a school registrar, a resource manager, a school manager. Somebody who reports directly to the head of the school and has people reporting to them. So that's just to clarify that.

And this is as of now, rather than how we perceive it in the future?

Em, I'm going to ask how is the role defined historically and currently, so the currently can bring in some of the changes, because I think that might be quite interesting. So that's the first question. By what process did you get departmental administrators in this context? In the first place?

By what process ..

How did they come into being?

How did they come into being? I think two things, really. It's a balance between what is required centrally as functions, and if we just take the two main functions determined centrally, one is about implementation of things like academic regulations at a school level. So a school registrar has that overall responsibility to ensure that the regulations are implemented both in terms of as far as individual students are concerned, course approvals, course monitoring, external examiners, all of those things. So, I think you start with that, if you like your academic infrastructures as QAA would define it. Then that has led to em generic er... school registrar job descriptions which have been taken on board into the new faculty registrar functions. And that's defined as having a, to some extent a quality assurance role, in terms of ensuring that exam boards run appropriately, are properly minuted, are properly resourced in that sense. External examiners are properly appointed, and where they are coming to the end of their periods for re-appointment and identifying new external examiners. Subject and programme assessment boards, make sure they work effectively, the course consultative committee system works effectively. So at that top level, then you've got those various responsibilities that the school registrar operates. Now the school registrars to date have reported directly to the deans, in the future under the new regime, they're going to report to the academic registrar with a dotted line to the deans, so there's going to be more overall central coordination of the faculty registrar function. There will only be 5 of them, 4 or 5 of them, because I am not sure what the [name of school] are doing in that respect. So that then spins into saying that person, the school registrar than has responsibility for a team of people to do those things. So then leads from the sort of top level responsibility of the integrity of the regulations at school level into the individual roles and responsibilities of the teams working within that. So for example, you might have admissions, although we now shifted that, admissions under the present system comes under the school registrar, that's moving out cos the admissions have been centralised. We've got a recruitment and marketing team now that doesn't, won't come under the registrar any more, it will come under the sort of head of marketing. Em, we have an examinations office, a school examinations office that comes under the academic registrar. We have an undergraduate and postgraduate course team that come under the registrar and we have student support office that comes under the registrar. So those are the sort of ways in which we have structured ourselves.

So those posts all come under the academic registrar rather than the faculty?

They'll come under the faculty registrar in terms of local management and for those issues then they'll be accountable to the dean, but for the regulatory part of it accountable to the academic registrar. That's how I understand the split going to operate. So the school registrar at the moment has overall responsibility for the, as I say, the integrity of the regulations and at the same time running a team of around 30ish people. So it's quite a sizeable job. And one of the things I'm starting to think through is whether we have almost a deputy registrar, responsible for, be careful with this in terms of how you

write it, em, but whether or not you slightly split the functions – you have an academic registrar who is very regulatory and a deputy who is responsible for the staffing side.

How did this change come about, what drove the change? From reporting to deans of school to reporting to the centre? Is it part of an HR strategy, or ...?

I think it was basically because it's felt by the new VC that the university at a top level is not joined up enough. And that if you look at things like how we deal with plagiarism cases, if you look at how we deal with late submission of coursework and so on, there's too much diversity, and so by trying to have a stronger co-ordination, fewer units and stronger co-ordination that's more effective. I think if we then spin off into the resources side, the same model as well is coming about. At the moment we have a resources manager who were appointed probably, many of them have been in post for 7,8,9 years. The complexity of the business has increased. The amount of devolution of budgets to schools and now faculties is at a reasonably high level. I mean they're devolving in the university about 60% of the university's expenditure down to schools, down to faculties and schools, about 40% is central, 60% is devolved. And as a result of that, the monitoring of the finances is a job in it's own right. But at the moment, the resources manager is dealing with the finance and accounting, they're not necessarily qualified accountants although some of them are getting trained. Em, so they're dealing with that and then all the sort of resources issues outside the IT, you know, so room bookings, maintenance of the building, health and safety, all of those issues. With a wider faculty as well it's going to be impossible so they've created – the other way it's going is that posts of faculty accountants have been created. The faculty accountants again report to the Director of Finance for the university and then locally, but also have a line into the Dean. So the same model as the faculty registrars, but with a line in to the Dean again. But then in addition to that, most faculties are going for a faculty facilities manager is what we've called it, whereby the post is responsible for managing the facilities, rooms, issues around health and safety, timetabling, database, room utilisation, operating the reception function, that sort of thing. The up-front running of the buildings.

So it's everything that is not academic, not regulatory, related to the academic work or finance? It's everything else?

Yes, that's right, yep. Apart from IT, where we've got a separate IT operation.

How much input as Dean of School/Faculty have you had in the identity of these particular roles in your school?

Quite well, because the, as part of the review process, er, job descriptions were circulated to all the Deans and they had the opportunity to comment and so on, and also, we will be involved in the appointment process, have been involved because the faculty registrars have been appointed, the faculty accountants haven't been yet. But it's a joint appointment, it'll obviously be a joint board in the terms of interviewing and so.

But the actual distribution of duties and responsibilities is more or less the same across each of the schools, you haven't had a lot of say well in my school I would like this to happen?

No.

It's fairly clearly defined?

Yeh, and I think that's not unreasonable really. Because I think you don't want, I don't want to be doing things differently from other parts of the university in that respect because otherwise all you're going to get is hassle from students because they'll talk to other students and say why is this different. You've got to have a degree of conformity otherwise you're going to have a fairly chaotic system.

EXTRACT

Appendix 3 – Extract of data table

Data table – Framework 1 – Senior administrator role definition - EXTRACT

Data source	Data analysis categories			Comments
	Central influence	Head of unit influence	Post holder influence	
<u>Single case study</u>				
IV 1 SM	Need to be centrally controlled in order to improve effectiveness and consistency of work across institution. 28+	On a cyclical basis there will be more influence as the roles and responsibilities become established within central framework. 10+	Mainly through how they operationalise the definition provided by the centre and supplemented by the Head of Unit. 289+	Keen that all stakeholders are included in the development of the role, but that it should be centrally controlled overall in order to ensure consistency of student experience across the different academic units.
IV 2 SM	Influenced centrally because of changes to the whole institution and HE in the UK. 283+ The desire that finance and quality procedures and practice be implemented equally across the institution. 136+	The Head will influence the actual implementation of the overall role that has been defined centrally – welcome this approach. 4+	As part of the organic growth of the role to date, not seen to be important in the current review and control of the role. 226+	There has been organic growth of the role within the institution and this has happened to a point where central control is now needed to bring everyone together. 226+
IV 3 SM(F)	Recognised importance of everybody in the role having similar responsibilities, need for standard practice, seen as Senior Manager's role to review and revise roles. 41+	Some consultation with the Heads with regards to responsibilities and duties undertaken by post holder. 45+	No involvement with the definition of the role itself, some specialist project work expected depending on competence and interest. 32+, 131+	A senior administrator with financial responsibility should always occupy a centrally defined role to ensure consistent quality. 41+
IV 4 HoAU	Instigated by the VC. 69+ Influenced by the central implementation of single student records systems, single academic regulations, and other new systems for whole university to give parity of student experience. 378+, 26+	Heads able to comment on centrally created job description before it was implemented. 99+	No comments on how the individual really contributes to the overall definition of the role, believed to be more an operational influence as to what actually gets done and how. 420+	Overall view is that a centrally defined role will ensure that the academic unit is better supported for systems development and regulatory compliance.
IV 5 HoAU	Centrally defined roles seen as being imposed on the academic unit by the institution, and seen to be generally a good thing. 42+	Head involved with definition through the central committee structure of the institution. 355+	Influence possible by those in post in discussion with each other in relation to sharing and developing good practice. 391+	Overall view is that the roles need to be centrally defined so there is some order in the way things are done and post holders can share ideas and improve the overall administration of academic units.
IV 6 HoAU	Because the university needed to communicate effectively and efficiently	Because the Head is a member of the central management committee that	Operational influence on how things are done, mainly focused on systems and	Overall the view is that it is more effective for the centre to define and

	with the academic units they needed to have common roles and responsibilities and therefore created centrally defined roles. 37+	developed the roles, by default was able to have some influence. 84+ Local implementation of the role will mean that the Head has more influence at that level. 90+	procedures. 211+	control the senior administrative posts as it take the responsibility off the Head, whilst still enabling the Head to influence the day-to-day operationalisation of the role and the post holder to put those ideas into practice. 61+
IV 7 AUSA	Main influence on definition of role with generic job descriptions emanating from the Academic Registrar. 84+	The Heads seem determined to use their Senior Administrators in different ways because they are allowed to establish their own management structures in each of the academic units. 106+	No direct post holder input to the central definition and creation of the job description. 133+ Likely to be some personal influence on the implementation of the role and how it is developed.142++	Overall view is that there could be some benefits to the generic role but there are some fundamental flaws as the Heads of units are able to define their own management structure in their units. This will mean that the Heads have a stronger influence over the definition of the role than the centre in real terms. Then the post holder will be able to influence the role in a task focussed way within the requirements of the Head.
IV 8 AUSA	The centre appears to want more control whilst at the same time wanting to effectively devolve responsibility to the academic units. 272+	Head seems to have taken little opportunity to influence the role definition as they have left the post holder to develop the role in the most effective and efficient way possible to get the work done and support the unit well. 334+	Local implementation of the centrally defined role allows the post holder to have quite a strong influence on the operationalisation of the role. 243+ No direct influence on the content of the job description. 351+	Overall views the central definition of the role as beneficial. 279+ It will always be down to the Head of the unit to control or empower the post holder's influence on how the role is developed locally within the overall remit defined by the centre.287+
IV 9 AUSA (F)	Role centrally defined to improve communication between the centre and the unit. 6+	Head has quite significant influence on how the post holder will act in the post. 169+	There was a survey of all post holders about their responsibilities and activities that was used to influence the new central job descriptions. 100+	Overall views the role as being defined centrally with the post holder implementing it in conjunction with the Head of unit in the most effective way for that particular unit.169+
IV 10 AUSA (F)	Role centrally defined through the job description. 6+	Head of unit identified business needs and the role developed to support them.18+ Head is part of the university's senior management and as such is involved in the decisions regarding the central definition of the role. 88+	Strongly influenced by the post holder at the operational level within the remit of the job description. 6+ Actual job develops in response to local need and the job description is useful to provide a focus of responsibility. 137+	Overall views the role as being inevitably defined by the centre as a means of ensuring each unit is covering all required aspects of the business in the context of changing national requirements. Recognises that the influence of the Head of unit on the structure of the unit and actual remit of the role is crucial. The post holder will always be able to influence the role operationally if they want to, but they would need to seek out the opportunities to do this. 10+

Appendix 4 – Executive Summary

Partners not competitors: the development of the role of the senior administrator as an integral part of the work of academic units in UK universities in the 21st century

Context and focus of the research

It is a widely held belief that the role of senior administrators in academic units in UK universities is ill-defined and sometimes perceived to be in conflict with that of their academic colleagues. This can cause frustrations and misunderstandings within academic units and universities and lead to the development of less effective and less efficient working practices.

This research aims to discover more about how and by whom the role is defined, what responsibilities the post holders have, and how they are perceived within their units and universities. The aim is to inform future strategic planning of administrative structures at both institutional and academic unit level, professional development provision at institutional level, personal career development planning and activities undertaken by current and aspiring senior administrators, and events and support provided by the Association of University Administrators (AUA).

Theoretical frameworks drawn upon

Three conceptual frameworks emerge from a review of the relevant literature from which the main research questions have been developed. These frameworks demonstrate that:

- 1) Where there is stronger influence over the definition of the role from the institutional senior management and the head of the academic unit, then the post holder has less influence over that definition;
- 2) Where there is high clarity of role definition and a wide range of responsibilities assigned, then there is an increased likelihood of the post holder undertaking responsibilities that were previously undertaken by academic colleagues;
- 3) Where there is a perception of the professionalisation of the role and the work is considered to be important to the unit, more effective working relationships are likely to be established between senior administrators and academic colleagues.

There are three different stakeholder groups identified as being of significant influence over the senior administrator role: 1) institutional senior managers, 2) heads of academic units, and 3) the post holders. The research set out to discover how far these concepts were the lived experiences of members of each of these stakeholder groups at two case study institutions.

Methodology and methods

Using a case-study methodology, two studies were undertaken at different institutions to investigate these concepts. One was a post-1992 university in the Midlands where semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers, heads of academic units and post holders. The second case study focussed on a research diary compiled by the author and documentary analysis relating to the implementation of a new senior administrator role at a pre-1992 university.

Findings

The findings relate to the three specific areas identified by the conceptual frameworks: 1) role definition, 2) responsibilities assigned and 3) perceptions held of the role. There were no significant differences of opinion among the three stakeholder groups identified previously. Whilst the elements of the frameworks are all present in the data, it has emerged that the links between them and the importance of one in relation to another is believed to be different in the case study institutions from that portrayed in the literature. The findings under each of the frameworks are that:

- 1) The definition of the role is very strongly influenced by the job description and where these influences are strongest from the central institutional managers and the heads of the academic units, then the post holder is less likely to have had much impact on the creation of that job description;
- 2) Where the senior administrators' responsibilities within the unit have been clearly communicated both locally and within the university and there is a wide range of appropriate and relevant responsibilities assigned, then there is an increased likelihood that academic colleagues will be willing to relinquish administrative responsibilities to the senior administrator;
- 3) Where highly effective working relationships with academic colleagues have been developed and the senior administrators' work is believed to be important to the academic unit, then there is a stronger perception that the role has a professional status.

There is also a widely held view that there is a strong need for all stakeholders to demonstrate highly effective communication skills within a clearly defined communication structure to underpin the successful implementation and operationalisation of the role within the academic units.

Value of the research and recommendations

A number of recommendations have been developed from these findings in order to support further improvements in professional practice in the areas covered by this research. They are designed to provide institutions, heads of units and post holders with some indication of where current activities can be expanded and new developments can be initiated. Each recommendation responds to the main focus of this research which set out to investigate the developing role of senior administrator in academic departments and how these can become more effectively and efficiently implemented and operationalised.

The recommendations are made to the main stakeholder groups: 1) senior institutional managers, 2) heads of academic units and 3) current and aspiring senior administrators:

- 1) Senior institutional managers
 - To periodically review institutional and academic unit human resource strategies to develop the most appropriate administrative structure for the institution and the academic units.
 - To provide relevant professional development programmes and opportunities for all current and aspiring university administrators to support and develop careers that respond to the needs of the institution and wider higher education sector.

- 2) Heads of academic units
 - To develop local induction programmes for all staff that clearly communicate the senior administrator's role, its responsibilities and how the post holder is expected to interact amongst the members of the unit.
 - To establish the role of senior administrator as an important one within the overall management structure of the unit through involvement in the relevant committees and other groups in the unit, and through line management of the administrative staff.
- 3) Current and aspiring senior administrators
 - To undertake study for relevant professional qualifications and professional development activities available through their own institution, other universities and through the professional body.
 - To proactively engage in the institution's probation and appraisal/review process to structure and progress their career.
 - To develop skills of communication to support sustained improvements to professional practice and working relationships.

Furthermore, the relevant professional body, the Association of University Administrators, has a significant role to play in complementing all of these recommendations by providing a qualification structure that encourages continued development towards higher levels of professional accreditation (possibly through collaboration with other relevant professional bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators, the Chartered Institute of Marketing, or one of the professional accounting bodies), and by providing professional development events to support the development of communication skills to underpin the development of highly effective working relationships between senior administrators and their academic colleagues.

Limitations and possibilities for further research

As this research was conducted in just two institutions, care must be taken when relating the findings to other universities. Further research could be undertaken to investigate how wide-spread these perceptions are and enable a subsequent refinement of the recommendations. It would also be important to evaluate how effective these recommendations are (when implemented) in improving working relationships between the post holders and their academic colleagues and for institutions to continually monitor the situation.

Conclusions

This research was initiated with the aim of contributing to the improvement of working relationships between senior administrators and their academic colleagues through increasing our knowledge of how the roles are defined, their assigned responsibilities and the perceptions held of the post holders. It is hoped that the recommendations built on its findings will contribute to this development and dialogue amongst the institutions, heads of units, academics, and current and aspiring senior administrators and their professional body.