A REVIEW OF THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SUNDERLAND WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

The research on this topic forms part of the focus of the professional doctorate that I am currently undertaking at University of Sunderland. The area of research is examining working relationships between academic and administrative staff at the University of Sunderland. The motivation and interest in the research have been developed both from my degree and through employment at the University of Sunderland.

This work is conducted in an attempt to answer the original research question "Can improvements be made to enhance the working relationship between academic and administrative staff".

The study aims to critically analyse the working relationships between academic and administrative staff at a post 1992 University in the North East of England. It is anticipated that the final recommendations will demonstrate strategies that, if adopted will enhance the working relationship between the two groups of staff. The aim of the study is not to prove the existence of a particular phenomenon, as there are no preconceived ideas about what the findings might be. A basic premise of this research considers that even if the data obtained from the two groups of staff does not highlight any problems, proposed suggestions can always be made to make improvements to the working relationship between the academic and administrative members of staff.

The area of research is prevalent in the current climate due to the changes and external pressures that are being placed on Universities. There has as Vabo (1) states, been an increase in the number of students, new management regimes, amended policies and changes in funding arrangements within Higher Education in recent years and as a result of this a considerable increase in the number of administrative positions within Higher Education. The external environment in which universities operate has vastly changed over the last 40 years and there is now a lot of survival pressure on universities in the UK. Conway (2) states that there have been considerable changes in technology, government funding and a change in attitudes and constraints which have led universities towards operating as a business model. Conway (2) suggests that in the light of these changes, there is the need for effective collaboration between academic and administrative staff.

The paper seeks to examine the benefits of collaboration within the University of Sunderland and investigates the notion of communities of practice that are currently in existence. The findings from the study will be discussed surrounding this topic. The work of Wenger (3) is drawn upon and further developed by the proposal of academic and administrative staff working within the same community of practice.

Keywords: Higher Education, Administrative Staff, Academic Staff, Communication, Collaboration, Communities of Practice.

1 INTRODUCTION

The research study aims to investigate the working relationship between academic staff and administrative staff at a post 1992 University in the North East of England. This is alongside a critical exploration of the perceptions of such staff regarding the effectiveness and the perceived problems or issues within those working relationships. As a member of administrative staff within this University, the research is not only relevant within my own area of working practice, it seeks to attempt to understand the issues which administrative colleagues and myself encounter on a daily basis. This research therefore aims to gather the views and experiences of staff from both an academic role and an administrative role perspective on the working relationships that they have with each other. The research study has the potential to impact upon future working practices. It is the intention that the
findings from this study will identify a series of recommendations that if enforced would significantly improve the social context of my own practice.

The area of research is prevalent in the current climate due to the changes and external pressures that are being placed on Universities. There has as Vabo (1) states, been an increase in the number of students, new management regimes, amended policies and changes in funding arrangements within Higher Education in recent years and as a result of this a considerable increase in the number of administrative positions within Higher Education. The external environment in which universities operate has vastly changed over the last 40 years and there is now a lot of survival pressure on universities in the UK. Conway (2) states that there have been considerable changes in technology, government funding and a change in attitudes and constraints which have led universities towards operating as a business model. Taylor and Underwood (4) comments that the UK is one of the very few countries where the number of non-academic staff outnumbers that of the academic members of staff. In addition Vabo, (1) states that there has also been a change in the skills profile of administrative employees and there have been the creation of new and expanding roles to support the changes in Higher Education. The Association of University Teachers cited within UCU (5) produced a report and stated that administrative staff have an important role alongside academic staff in making a direct contribution to the provision of Higher Education. The report suggests that traditionally these roles have been seen as supporting academic staff; however the report further states that it is now evident that administrative staff have a contribution to teaching and learning too. The report refers to the 1997 Dearing report as suggesting that the career opportunities for administrative staff within Higher Education have increased, and there can often be an overlap in roles with academic staff.

All of the changes highlighted that have impacted on Higher Education can potentially be viewed as having and still having an impact on the role that both academic and administrative staff now hold within universities. Conway (2) suggests that in the light of these changes, there is the need for effective collaboration between academic and administrative staff.

Throughout my time working within Higher Education, I have witnessed the benefits of effective communication and strongly feel that it is vital between members of staff as it forms the basis for productive working relationships, and staff can learn a lot from other colleagues. Frey (6) in the review of Brown and Levinson work states that effective communication is vital in everyday life and this can be viewed as being paramount within the workplace.

2 METHODOLOGY

The data for the study was collected through semi structured interviews and analysed following the main principles of grounded theory. The rationale behind this is that grounded theory is directed by the interests of the researcher and grounded theory is close to everyday behaviour and action. (Sarantakos 7) Creswell (8) defines Grounded Theory as the researcher developing a general theory of a process or interaction that is grounded in the view of the participants.

The study obtained views and opinions on communications from a sample of academic and administrative staff, thus the “theory” is derived from the responses provided by the interviewees. The sample chosen, was aimed at a wide a range as possible of academic and administrative staff across the Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland. The principle behind this was to enable the results to be applied to as many staff as possible.

There were 14 members of staff interviewed 7 academic staff and 7 administrative staff. These staff were of various grades (for both academic and administrative) and the staff had all been employed at the University for a minimum of six months. The gender of the participants was 10 females and 4 males and the age range was from 35-60 years of age. All of these participants (as indicated by their line manager) had substantial contact with either administrative (for the academic participants) or academic (for the administrative participants) in their day to day role. For the administrative staff this was mainly the placement and quality staff and for the academic staff this was generally either Programme or Module Leaders.

The interviews were initially transcribed, prior to the analysis of the data. In line with the grounded theory approach, coding was derived from the data to commence the initial section of the analysis. The Quirkos computerised package was subsequently used for further in depth analysis. The package was used to draw out any possible codes that may have been omitted in the original analysis and to demonstrate the relevant themes derived from the data.
3 RESULTS

On pursuing the themes and focusing on the research question, there were five overarching themes all with numerous sub themes that addressed the original question. This paper explores the theme of collaboration and communication between the academic and administrative staff.

The responses from the research conducted at University of Sunderland highlighted that where there was collaboration and a sense of working together the working relationship was more effective and efficient. It is the intention to draw on these responses with the aim of demonstrating how if collaboration was adopted significantly more within the workplace, the relationship between staff could be more efficient.

The work of Conway and Dobson (9) proposes a link between the changing roles of administrative and academic staff and the need for effective collaboration between the two groups of staff. Conway (2) further demonstrates that the majority of the communication that occurs between the two groups of staff takes place within the Faculties and Departments within Universities.

Conway (2) further introduces the notion that it is a necessity for the two groups of staff to have a greater understanding of the work of each other and the skills and the knowledge that is required to perform each of these roles. This would need to occur at every level, not just from those in leadership or management positions. Within my study examples were prevalent of praising collaboration and this was evidenced across all scales of both academic and administrative staff.

“Both academic and administrative staff are here for the students and so we are united with the purpose”

“.building those relationships and in having that communication is really important”

“I have no knowledge of why we are not organised in teams rather than in silos “

Interestingly, these quotes albeit substantially different, all intrinsically propose the notion of collaboration. The first unites the academic and administrative staff with their common goal and this is in line with the vision and values of the University (10). The people strategy (10) emphasises that it is expected that staff use collaboration and utilise communications. Thus, if the goal of the two groups of staff are identical then this will need the academic and administrative staff to work cohesively to achieve this goal. Any issues of conflict that may arise between the two groups would make the task harder to achieve. It would be naive to state that conflict and miss communications would not occur at times, and so there is the need for such instances to be addressed as and when they occur. With the adoption of clear communication and effective communication this will ensure that the process of addressing these issues are much easier to address. When utilising collaboration, these situations are able to be resolved to address these miss communications. Rowley and Sherman (11) By working together across the teams, issues can be addressed more efficiently than operating with minimum or very little collaboration.

The second quote is making reference to building a relationship with academic staff and communicating appropriately. There is the need for collaboration between the two groups of staff for this to occur. The notion of actually communicating with each other in the workplace and building relationships between staff members was viewed by this participant as being of importance. Such an opinion was evident from other participants within the study too. The benefits of communication between academic and administrative staff that is evident here also supports the results of the study by Allen-Collinson (12). Within this study at a UK University research administrators who worked independently from academic staff expressed their opinion on communication with their academic colleagues. The study reported that the administrators who had built a working relationship with the academic staff and whom they communicated frequently with resulted in a more effective working relationship. It is my belief that the mere act of communication amongst individuals can result in a clear understanding of each other and the work that is involved. Communicating as Allen-Collinson (12) found results in building working relationships between those staff who work and interact with each other frequently.

Working and collaborating across the teams is the suggestion within the final quote highlighted here. The notion of academic and administrative staff not working in separate silos and instead being part of one group is an interesting concept. If there is the suggestion of academic and administrative staff working cohesively and collaborating, therefore it can be said that this particular notion is moving this on one further stage. Personally through the various positions I have had within the University, I have experienced changes in membership of communities of practice. This confirmed that it was possible to belong to more than one community of practice and that an individual can have a variety of roles within each of these communities of practice. Wenger (3) refers to this as being a core member or a peripheral member. Thus, although I was always a member of the support team and was a member
of the administrative community of practice there were instances due to the role I possessed of being a periphery member of the management team community of practice. I witnessed when my role changed within the University of belonging to one community of practice and yet also being part of another community of practice at particular times. Thus I switched unconsciously between the two - namely administrative group and management academic group. This was determined by the task in hand and also the staff members with whom I was conversing. Is it the situation that all staff view themselves as belonging to a particular community of practice i.e. academic versus administrative and then within these communities of practice into subject teams. This posed the question could staff belong to one community of practice, namely University of Sunderland staff member and then into subject teams?

To investigate the notion of communities of practice it is worthwhile to look at the dimensions that a community of practice evolves from. This is namely mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Wenger (3). These can then be further linked back to the idea of one community of practice. Both the academic and administrative staff who are working closely together already possess the engagement with each other. The mutual engagement defines the particular community, the staff will already be engaged in partaking actions which involve negotiating with each other. This for example could include entering the office to discuss the progress of a student, which will have involvement from both the academic and administrative member of staff, albeit different elements of this. It is anticipated that due to the nature of the work they will already have a shared repertoire for the work that they are undertaking. All of the members of a particular community of practice work together, communicate with each other daily and exchange ideas. (Wenger 3) In my experience this already happens with some staff members who may be in separate community of practices, however come together and work closely due to the identical group of students or subject that they are both working with. This strengthens the argument for both of these groups of staff to unite together and form or create one community of practice.

It is worth noting that following on from the work of Wenger (3) who notwithstanding that a particular community of practice comprises of a group of individuals who have a shared repertoire and communicate and work closely together, these individuals also possess their own individual role within a certain community of practice. Therefore although the common goal of the community of practice would be identical, this is not stating that all of the individuals have the same role. The individual identity of each member also contributes and forms part of that particular community of practice. All of the individuals are cohesive and they possess the mutual engagement in their goal, however the members all possess their own individuality to reach the aims and goal of the community of practice.

Staff belonging to one community of practice tend to possess the same values as other members of this community of practice. Wenger (3) states that people within a community of practice learn from each other, build relationships and engage in joint discussions. This also involves the use of communication between the members of the group. The members of the communities of practice possess the same goals and this is an intrinsic section of the people strategy (10) whereby staff at the University of Sunderland all have a common goal. Therefore the notion of one community of practice that incorporates both academic and administrative staff as one community assists to address this section of the people strategy (10) too. This is not to state that all staff members are to have the same role or indeed even belong to only one community of practice. Within a community of practice different roles can be apparent; it is the working together and learning from each other that is the key component and the driver for the members of that particular community of practice. These members will naturally belong to other communities of practice - an administrator for a programme may well be situated within the community of practice with their academic colleagues for the particular area that they manage. This though is in addition to their other role as a member of the administrative community of practice. Their role is still as an administrator, however their main community of practice for which they are a member does not have to be the administrative community and can be the community of the subject area of the work for which they are the administrator responsible for this area of work. Similarly an academic member of staff will be part of the subject team community of practice and yet still also be a member of the academic community of practice.

In terms of learning Wenger (3) explains that maintaining interconnected communities of practice enables an organisation to become more effective. Being a member of more than one community of practice can create interconnectivity between communities of practice with which a member of staff is a member of. For instance a member of administrative staff could potentially be a member of the secondary subject team and the administrative assessment team. There are connections between the two and maintaining these connections allows for the members of staff to become more effective.
Surprisingly, efficiencies can be achieved through the notion of being active members of the same community of practice. As the members of a community of practice have the same institutional goal, collaboration can result in significantly higher quality ideas than an individual could produce on their own. (Strauss 13) This particular question was not asked of the participants in terms of their views on efficiencies, although there was evidence that collaboration and communication between the academic and administrative members of staff can be viewed in a positive light. Taking into consideration the view by Strauss (13) relating to collaboration producing higher quality ideas than staff working individually on tasks; the natural assumption would be that being in close proximity would create more opportunities for collaboration to occur. This in turn would enable the particular team to produce ideas more beneficial than simply working alone.

The notion of the mutual engagement as Wenger (3) states naturally produces relationships between the members of the particular community of practice. This supports the work of Conway (2) who implies that the participants in the particular study found that by building relationships between the academic and the administrative staff this resulted in better working relationships between the groups of staff. Thus being part of one community of practice would result in such relationships being built and strengthened upon over time. It is only natural that there may be miscommunications and that harmony may not be present all of the time within the community of practice. Disagreements and tensions will happen from time to time, however if working relationships have been built up it would be anticipated that these can be more openly addressed amongst each other.

Within the responses received in the study there was evidence of miscommunications that did occur and some participants provided responses as to how these were addressed. One such response was to speak directly to the other member of staff concerned to address the issue. Other examples of miscommunication occurred through a distinct lack of communication between the individual members of staff. One individual further commented that they were working with someone from a different department and there was no familiarity involved. This was resolved by speaking directly to the person involved to rectify the situation. Such occasions may still occur as all staff members cannot simply be involved in one community of practice and thus communications and work will still occur between the different communities of practice. It is anticipated that miscommunication or difficulties within one community of practice could be alleviated between academic and administrative staff by these members of staff being within one community of practice as opposed to two different communities of practice.

Wenger (3) states that to extend further the benefits of one community of practice is to investigate the positive nature of a “well-functioning community of practice” (pg. 214) Within this the members of staff are all working towards one common goal and the mutual engagement and the working relationships that these staff members have achieved with each other results in new insights being produced. Thus the community of practice can be deemed as creating new knowledge. If issues arise that need a resolution these can be resolved by the participants in a more efficient and productive way. A community of practice promotes collaboration between the members of that particular community and these members can work together to address any issues and this also seeks to follow the aims set out in the people strategy (10) of encouraging staff to contribute and work collaboratively at the University of Sunderland.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The notion of effective communication and collaboration and the impact that this has on the working relationship was viewed favourably from the responses received in the study. The two groups of staff provided examples of a more effective working relationship when collaboration and open communication was involved. The theme of collaboration and communication extending into academic and administrative staff belonging to their subject specific community of practice is the concomitant effect of developing this theme by exploring how effective communities of practice are. By examining the components and the benefits of working in subject specific communities of practice it is evident how this can be advantageous for the two groups of staff and ultimately the University. It is of relevance to stress that miss communications will still occur, however these can be easily addressed due to the nature of the working relationship that the two groups of staff would possess.
REFERENCES


