Those who walk the talk: the role of administrative professionals in transforming universities into strategic actors

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Abstract

The group of administrators working in the Swedish higher education sector is undergoing considerable change. National statistics show that the average educational level is increasing and that more staff are being recruited from the private sector. This article discusses the implications of such changes on life and work in academia. In particular, it points to a link between new administrative roles and new demands placed on universities to become more coherent, goal-oriented organisations—so-called strategic actors. The article builds on national statistics and an in-depth interview study of administrative professionals from the areas of internationalisation, business liaison and research funding support, at three technical universities in Sweden. The study indicates that administrative professionals can have considerable impact on the management of a university. Lacking formal decision-making power, their influence tends to be indirect. Nevertheless, they can fulfil important roles as guardians of a holistic perspective, reminding internal stakeholders of the organisational aims of the university. Their role requires a set of competences and experiences that includes academic background as well as an attitude of self-reflection, sensitivity and judgement. In conclusion, it is argued that administrative professionals can play a crucial part in transforming universities into strategic actors. Their function merits more attention as it touches upon important issues of power and strategic direction in contemporary higher education.

Keywords: administration; professionalisation; higher education; strategy; management.

In context

University work is often equated with the work of professors and lecturers, but this is not the full picture. Approximately 20% of the workforce in Swedish higher education is employed in support services. In recent years, the profile of this group has changed considerably. Nowadays many administrative jobs require a higher education degree, some even a doctorate. Administrators work in strategic areas such as internationalisation, business liaison and research funding support. In this study, we investigate some of the consequences of these changes. We analyse national statistics and interview a group of experienced administrators. Our conclusion is that, because of their competences and skills, such administrative professionals can play an important role as internal change agents. They can contribute towards making universities more goal-oriented and strategic. This in turn is a controversial development, and we therefore argue that the role of administrative professionals should be more widely discussed.

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In the last two decades, scholars have been much pre-occupied with the new and increased demands placed on higher education institutions and the new roles that they are expected to play. Universities, it is argued, are to act strategically and become more coherent, goal-oriented organisations (Gornitzka, 1999; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez, 2010). The time when window dressing was a tacitly accepted practice is over, replaced by an expectation that universities will not only have goals but also implement them—actually ‘walk the talk’ (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Reforms in the Swedish higher education sector have followed this trajectory, broadly associated with new public management (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The main thrust of two reform packages, in 1993 and 2010, was to increase the self-governing capacity of Swedish higher education institutions. In effect, the importance of strategic plans, mission statements, indicators and other
means of planning, managing and accounting for performance has grown.

These developments also have consequences for life and work in academia. Who, in practice, is going to make sure that higher education institutions, in addition to providing high quality teaching and research, deliver on the new promises? One response may be: the leaders. Indeed, some research has gone into what happens at the top, exploring the changing role of academic leaders and governing boards (cf. Deem, Hilliyard, & Reed, 2010; Goodall, 2009; Rowlands, 2012). However, there is also a growing interest in what happens on the floor, in the realms of academic work and academic citizenship (cf. Kehm & Teichler, 2013; Macfarlane, 2007).

One category that is relatively new to the spotlight is support staff who do not perform teaching and research tasks but who work in the interface between academia and administration, and/or in the interface between the university and the surrounding community. This group, referred to as ‘higher education professionals’ (Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013) or ‘third space professionals’ (Whitchurch, 2008), is inherently associated with the new functions of higher education institutions. Thus, they typically work in areas such as managerial support, community and business liaison, institutional research, internationalisation, human resource development and quality assurance. Previous studies undertaken in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Norway and Germany (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Mcinnis, 1998; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013; Whitchurch, 2009) have portrayed this group and their competences, attitudes and relations.

In this study, we follow suit by investigating the strategic role of administrative professionals in the Swedish higher education system. This research is motivated on several grounds. Despite the existence of relatively rich national statistics, there is a lack of research-based contributions to this discourse from a Swedish perspective. Brushed off as ‘overhead costs’, the actual role and characteristics of administrative professionals are often disregarded. If discussed, there is a tendency to polarise by setting administrative roles against academic ones (Kogan, 2007). Recently, this problem was raised by a Commission of Inquiry into management and governance in Swedish higher education. Acknowledging the need for specialist support in strategic processes, the commission argued that mutual respect and a shared culture are imperative in furthering the common goals of the university (Bremer, 2015). In our view, all this calls for more in-depth studies that can provide a better understanding of statistics as well as more nuance to the current debate. In particular, there is a need to highlight the role of administrative professionals when it comes to transforming universities into strategic actors.

Theoretical framework

Universities as strategic actors

This study builds on the recent discourse on strategic actorhood in higher education. A higher education institution that is a strategic actor is defined as follows:

an integrated goal-oriented entity that is deliberately choosing its own actions and thus can be held responsible for what it does. (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 241)

Goal-orientation and intentionality, in other words, are key ingredients in the definition of strategic. On the surface, this may appear straightforward but in fact, the idea of universities having such strategic capabilities marks a radical challenge to an established depiction – namely that of universities as organisational exceptions (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Musselin, 2006). Universities have been described as successful in shielding their core functions of teaching and learning from external influence. Policy and practice have been seen to occur in separate worlds, the adoption of policies being weak and symbolic whilst day-to-day practices remain unchanged. In theoretical terms, this has been called loose coupling. In popular terms, we may describe it as window dressing, or even hypocrisy. However, scholars have not necessarily interpreted this as a negative state of affairs. Rather, they have regarded it as an effective means of protecting a highly institutionalised organisation and its internal norms (Brunsson, 2002; March & Olsen, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976).

The idea of the university as a strategic actor, therefore, is relatively new and can be linked to the intensified external pressure on higher education, coming from a complex range of stakeholders. Arguably, present-day higher education institutions are increasingly subject to both market pressures and political demands (Hedmo & Wedlin, 2008). Theorists also point to a general drive in the public sector towards increased rationality in organisational life. There is constant pressure upon organisations to be strategic, deliberate and target-focused in response to the needs of contemporary society. This is why the actor concept, which is considered strong, is gaining ground at the expense of weaker organisational forms such as arenas and agents (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

By the same token, the idea of loose coupling between policy and practice is now being reconsidered. It is argued that

In a rationalizing world, with heightened emphasis on transparency and accountability, policy–practice decoupling is increasingly likely to be seen as a moral and operational failure, in contrast to early conceptual depictions that emphasized the legitimacy benefits of decoupling. (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 498)
Contemporary organisations, in other words, find it harder than before to operate in a loosely coupled state. For the sake of credibility, they need to put real effort into implementing their policies. Bromley and Powell have found mounting empirical evidence that this is happening.

**Administrators as professionals**

Changes in the workforce have been identified as key factors in this development. The advent of mass education has meant that an increasing proportion of the workforce has undergone higher education. This is apparent in many administrative posts that have gone from low skill to high skill. Scholars point, not least, to the proliferation of management education in this regard. Increasingly, organisations are staffed with graduates taking up posts as controllers, strategists, specialists and communicators. Trained to work in accordance with certain ideals, these individuals are carriers of norms and ideas. This in turn has a cultural impact on the organisation they join (Forssell & Westerberg, 2014; Hedmo, Sahlin, & Wedlin, 2005; Scott, 2001).

Increased qualification requirements are associated with the notion of *professionalisation*. Having an academic education, however, is only a threshold definition as to when a job type can be regarded as professionalised. Beyond formal qualifications, professionalisation comes with several qualitative connotations. According to Brante, professions are first and foremost carriers of knowledge systems. Having a capacity for abstraction is therefore important, as is the ability to convey a feeling of confidence. Job performance is highly dependent on professional discretion and on a sense of trust between the profession and its stakeholders. The precise task is context dependent: what needs to be done will vary from one place to another, from one time to another (Brante, 2009).

The need for staff with skills and abilities that exceed routine requirements is often associated with external pressure. In a constantly changing environment, with a high degree of uncertainty as well as vitality, organisations need to develop a differentiated and flexible structure to be able to meet quick changes. While this type of employee uses more resources both in terms of salary and because the organisation has to allow them more discretion, it is a necessary investment in order to increase organisational capacity to deal with a variable environment (Drazin & Van de Ven, 1985; Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

In the higher education sector, changes in the profile of the administrative workforce have been described much along these lines. Schneijderberg and Merkator (2013) point to a professionalisation process tightly linked to the heightened demands on university management. Today’s higher education administrators not only need to possess advanced knowledge and skills, they also need to be well versed with and believe in the core functions of the university. Their jobs require continuous learning and sensitivity. Furthermore, Whitchurch (2008) notes that professionalisation has been coupled to a blurring of internal boundaries. There is now a ‘third space’ within the university where academics and administrators meet in joint strategic efforts – for example, to do with educational development and research support. Similarly, there is a blurring of boundaries between the university and the surrounding community where administrative professionals – for example, involved in business liaison and innovation – play an important role.

In this study, we wanted to investigate these phenomena as they apply to the Swedish higher education sector. Thus the research question guiding the study is, given that universities are expected to be strategic actors, what is the role of professional administrators in this development? More specifically, how do they contribute to the formulation and implementation of university strategies?

**Methodology**

For our study, we opted for a case study methodology combining quantitative data with interviews. As case studies we chose three technical universities: Chalmers University of Technology, KTH Royal Institute of Technology and Luleå University of Technology (LTU). We selected three broad areas: internationalisation, business liaison and research funding support. Within the three areas, we focused on what Whitchurch defines as the *project domain*, inhabited by ‘hybrid workers or multi-professionals who are not only more proactive within given structures, but are able to traverse inherited practices and fields to deliver broadly based projects across the university’ (Whitchurch, 2006, p. 163). Thus, we expected our informants to be highly involved in strategic work – constituting a purposive sample (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). During the interviews, we were given accounts of professional history and educational background that confirmed this (see below).

A total of 26 interviews were conducted. Of the interviewees, 16 were women and 10 were men. When selecting the interviewees, we sought a spread between universities and work areas. In total, we conducted 10 interviews at Chalmers, 9 at KTH and 7 at LTU. As per the purposive sample method, we targeted interviewees from the three areas as well as those with an overview of university strategies in general. In most instances, we identified potential interviewees ourselves by their organisational affiliation and title. In some cases, additional names were suggested to us. In the end, we selected five interviewees from the area of internationalisation, four from business liaison and nine from research support. An additional five interviewees worked in related strategic areas such as human resources, management support and
communication, whereas three were university directors or the equivalent.

The choice of technical universities was based on the expectation that they be receptive to the demands of industry, the engineering profession and other external stakeholders and therefore prone to change. In the literature, specialised universities are often portrayed as more entrepreneurial than multifaculty universities (Clark, 1998; Krücken & Meier, 2006). Our study did not set out to corroborate these claims. Neither are our findings generalisable in a statistical sense. Instead, we aimed at analytic generalisation (Yin, 2009). In other words, we put forward cases that are both interesting and illuminating and relate them to broader theories of strategy and change. By doing so we seek to show that they are relevant in a larger context.

In order to answer the research question we saw, first of all, a need to understand the general backdrop. To this end, we benefitted from the availability of national statistics from the Swedish Higher Education Authority on staff in the higher education sector. These statistics were provided both by time span and by academic category. Staff with positions other than academic were divided into administrative staff, library staff, technical staff and honorarium staff. For all staff categories, data on education level was available. Thus, the national data provided a general sense of administrators and their competences: head counts as well as proportion to other staff categories, educational backgrounds and work histories.

To get a fuller understanding – beyond the figures – we then undertook semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). During the interviews, which normally lasted approximately 1 hour, interviewees were asked to describe and analyse their cooperation patterns and working relationships with management, faculty and fellow support staff within the university. For example, they were asked to give concrete accounts of how projects are undertaken, for example, in terms of work methods, co-workers, stakeholders, roles and responsibilities. This served to paint a rich background picture. Interviewees were also asked to describe their involvement in the drafting, implementation and evaluation of strategic documents and to reflect on their own impact on such goal-oriented and intentional – that is, strategic – processes. The latter point was particularly important in order to link the discussion on new administrative roles to the discussion on new, strategic roles for universities. Following Bromley and Powell, one core theme concerned the role of administrative professionals in making sure that policies are not only formulated but also implemented.

The interview data were analysed qualitatively through a process of reading, coding and interpreting (Cohen et al., 2011; Schreier, 2012). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, after which they were coded using qualitative data software (NVivo). In order to improve consistency and reliability, the coding was done jointly by both authors.

Findings

A changing workforce

Regarding the statistics, we found that the profile of the workforce has undergone considerable change in the past decades. In 2014, the total number of employees in the Swedish higher education sector was approximately 64,000, of which 20% were employed as administrators (The Swedish Higher Education Authority/Statistics Sweden, 2015). The proportion of administrators has been very stable during the past 20 years and has increased hand in hand with the increase in academic staff. In recent years, staff increases have primarily taken place in the academic categories. The latter is largely due to increased research funding (The Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2015).

When it comes to educational background, there is a clear tendency towards increased educational attainment amongst administrative staff. Almost 70% (2012) hold a higher education degree of 3 years’ duration or longer. This marks a 20% increase in 20 years. Furthermore, the share of administrative staff holding a Ph.D. qualification has doubled since 1995. In 2012, approximately 9% of the administrative staff held a Ph.D. In terms of work experience, newly employed administrative staff members are most frequently recruited from the public sector, but an increasing trend in the past 10 years is recruitment from the private sector.

Thus, we conclude that the national data on administrative staff in Swedish higher education concurs with the general picture: the administrative workforce is undergoing considerable change with regard to competence and experience. It is reasonable to assume that the statistics include a growing proportion of administrative professionals working in strategic roles.

Our interviewees illustrate what this might mean in practice. They make an academically accomplished group: at least 13 have a master’s degree and 10 hold a Ph.D. Their educational background is, in equal proportions, either in technical/natural science or political/social science. Interviewees come with mixed portfolios of work experience from the business world, the public sector and the higher education sector, including academic research. What they have in common, however, is seniority, that is, considerable post-qualification experience. This meant that they, in the interview situation, could recount many lived examples and could compare their current work situation to others in the past.

What you need to do the job

We asked the interviewees to discuss the competences and attitudes that they regarded as key to the role. Formal
qualifications did not come to the fore in their responses, with one exception: administrators working in research funding support functions, who raised the importance of holding a Ph.D. Some of these interviewees regarded a doctorate as an absolute requirement: ‘without the title, it would not have worked’. By contrast, other interviewees felt that a Ph.D. was not strictly necessary because the job did not involve research per se. Those lacking a Ph.D. did not regard this fact as an obstacle in performing their everyday tasks. Most often, the Ph.D. qualification was discussed as a potential legitimising factor and as a bridge to academic affairs. In this interpretation it was not the title itself that mattered but the capacity to understand and empathise with academic work.

My colleagues and I, most of us, have a background in research. So we don’t feel that we are ‘on the other side’ or anything. We work in support services but we can still, at least we think so, relate rather well to the activities that take place at department level.

Thus, academic background is described as a mindset rather than something that needs to be explicitly highlighted. The title can, however, be used as a last resort in a (rare) conflict situation.

You don’t need to, I think, advertise it ... however, if someone is acting up a bit you can always say, I know the code too.

Apart from formal academic qualification, interviewees pointed to their role as experts in a specific field of practice. In this they leaned on many years of professional experience, but they also referred to the necessity to keep abreast of new developments in the surrounding community, such as policy changes related to research funding, student fees, political priority areas and so on. Some interviewees emphasised that they possessed detailed knowledge and expertise in a particular field, such as EU funding schemes. These individuals may have been sole bearers of this expertise within the university (if not in the country). Because members of management do not have the time or the capacity to acquire such detailed knowledge, they depend on informed administrative professionals in their decision-making.

Specialist knowledge, however, is only part of the brief. In addition, many interviewees pointed to the need for a holistic perspective. This was seen as key to fulfilling a guardian role, working for the good of the university as a whole. They maintained that professional administrators need to be able to hold the common university line at all times, sometimes in light of conflicting demands expressed by different stakeholders. A capacity for negotiation was important in this regard.

Then [the vice president] wants to discuss it, and you might say that this is impossible and this we are not allowed to do, but this I think we could pull through, and so on. And I feel that I represent a sort of helicopter view of [the university].

Interviewees also pointed to the need for flexibility and adaptability. To a large extent, it was they themselves who had defined the parameters of their work. No one had told them how, exactly, to do their job. Many of them had had no predecessor in the post that they were in at the time. Therefore in lieu of detailed job descriptions or orders, they needed to rely on their own experience.

Indirect yet substantial impact on strategy

Many interviewees were involved in negotiating and drafting strategic documents such as long-term visions, development plans, resource allocation systems and quality assurance systems for the university as a whole. They were also involved in the annual activity plans at department level, which in turn were linked to the overall strategies. Similarly, when it came to implementation and follow-up, they were often assigned lead roles. They may have had a direct role such as project leader or an indirect role to do with measuring or otherwise tracking performance.

Some interviewees pointed out that strategic orientation comes naturally to administrative staff, more so than to academic staff. This is something that came across in the employee surveys.

You could say that it is mostly we who implement what comes out of action plans and strategies. ... we view ourselves as very involved in that work and we actually always keep this in mind: what are the overarching targets and how do we work towards them? I’m happy about that. But it’s a pity that the academic part perhaps feels less involved in that work.

When explicitly asked to reflect upon their impact on strategic processes, interviewees described similar situations but varied in their interpretation. They referred to work situations in which they provided expert opinions, acted as secretaries and took part in strategic projects. Some interviewees downplayed their own influence on these processes, emphasising that they had no decision-making power and no personal stake in the matter.

So, I don’t feel that we have much influence but that we sometimes have important input to give. Then this may recur or not; it is always members of management who really write these documents through us.

Other interviewees believe that their personal influence is substantial due to the fact that they possess knowledge and skills upon which others depend. Administrative staff have more time and capacity than members of top management to read up and prepare for meetings, and
this puts them at an advantage. Being a secretary can in fact be an influential position.

... as soon as you are part of a reference group or as soon as you hold a pen, of course you have influence.

Many interviewees described their influence as a product of collaboration with management. By providing input to decision-makers, ensuring that the right people met at the right time and maintaining a holistic perspective, they contributed towards leaders being able to take issues forward. Some interviewees worked very closely with a particular member of management, such as a vice president. In those instances the two might work out joint, conscious strategies on how to influence the university at large. One interviewee referred to skills similar to lobbying skills acquired in a previous place of employment and noted how these could be put to successful use in a university setting. A good method was to act as the eyes and ears of the vice president, attending meetings, providing texts and talking to people within and outside the university. Trying to exert influence without the backing of academic leaders, in contrast, would be a hopeless undertaking.

The influence has been, above all, thanks to the tricks that [the vice president] and I have used jointly. ... At [the university] you need to work ... it is very important as an administrator to work closely with people in the management group or president’s group or so.

Other interviewees maintained that they wielded influence at another level, related to work practices. By reminding colleagues and leaders of strategic undertakings, they also pointed to particular ways of fulfilling them. Such arguments often met with support.

Yes, to a very, very large degree. Even to the extent that it was I who, when we started working with these processes, pointed out that it is difficult to work with processes unless we have formulated a clear target, and for that we also need a strategy. So, yes, to a large degree I would say.

A balancing act
The interviewees were of two minds about the impact that they had on the strategic direction of the university. On the one hand, they were clear in not wanting to exercise undue influence. In their view, it was important to avoid personal opinion as far as possible and to put the good of the university first.

It is up to others to assess, but I try to feel that I personally do not promote any particular issues – that is up to vice presidents, deputy presidents and the president. I get to be some kind of ear and brain, trying to translate: what would that mean in this context? Then of course you cannot help having personal opinions sometimes, but I try to refrain from promoting something that would be counter-productive for someone in management.

Many interviewees were wary of overstepping their mandate by entering into academic or management roles. Showing sensitivity to one’s place within the organisation was considered crucial. The place of the strategic expert, it was argued, is to facilitate decision-making, as well as the teaching and research duties that academics perform. Making actual decisions is not part of the brief.

I am not a vice president; I am very clear about that. I can sort of tell people what issues we are currently discussing and where we are at and so on, but it is [the vice president] who makes the decision and who holds the ultimate responsibility, not I.

In contrast, interviewees also expressed pride in their own expertise and in the key role that they had played in making strategic progress.

So my task is to support others but also at times to put myself on the back and think that I have a profession and competences too, to highlight this. So, it is about trying to find that balance.

Conclusions
The group of administrators working in the Swedish higher education sector is not what it used to be. Contrary to what is sometimes argued in the public debate, the issue is not that the group is growing in quantitative terms compared to academic staff. In fact, the proportion has remained highly stable over the last decades. The change is a qualitative one. As the statistics clearly demonstrate, the average educational level has increased, and there is a new mix of backgrounds including a trend towards hiring staff from the private sector. A professionalisation process of sorts appears to be taking place.

Highly educated, experienced and senior, our interviewees made a somewhat extreme group. Nevertheless, they provided a most telling and interesting illustration of professionalisation as defined by Brante (2009). Education is essential to their professional practice in an almost taken-for-granted manner. Working as senior advisor, specialist or project manager in research funding support, internationalisation or business liaison in a university setting is seen to require third-level education. This is not something to boast about but something that facilitates the job in a more tacit manner. It may have a practical function, insofar as all forms of training (mathematics, modelling, language, etc.) can be put to use. This is not the main point, however. As described by interviewees, the academic background is important not so much in itself but for the ability to understand the conditions under which research is produced and education is delivered. Knowing the code is essential. In this manner, a university degree plays a legitimising role.
Our study also suggests that, on top of formal qualification, having the right attitude towards the role is imperative. As professionals, the interviewees have a substantial degree of freedom when it comes to work methods and concrete tasks. They more or less have to make a personal degree of freedom when it comes to work methods and concrete tasks. They more or less have to make a personal investment in defining their own role. In fact, self-reflection appears to be part of the job. Therefore they are also highly aware of the need to exercise sensitivity and judgement. Above all, in order to do their job, they need to maintain a positive and constructive working relationship with academic staff. In reality, boundaries are often blurred as administrators act as spokespeople and ghost writers on behalf of academic leaders. They nonetheless stress that it is important to respect these boundaries. University directors excluded, all the interviewees introduce themselves as support staff, not as decision-makers. This appears to be vital to their self-understanding.

By virtue of this particular set of competences and approaches, acquired over an extended period of professional practice, our interviewees are well able to navigate the academic environment. Because their work is inherently collaborative, it may not be possible to disentangle their individual impact on the formulation and implementation of university strategies. This impact is often indirect. Even so, we would argue that their influence is considerable. These are professionals who regard themselves as guardians of the ‘university as a whole’ and who have assumed the role of reminding management, faculty and fellow support staff of the organisational aims of the university. Working close to management, they provide material needed for analysis and decision-making and the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions. Their insistence on logical implementation chains is put forward with the operationalisation of these decisions.

In our view, these are arguments for paying more attention to administrative professionals in the study of change and strategy in higher education. So far, the changing profile of the administrative profession has largely gone unnoticed. In future, viewing this group merely as an overhead cost or as nothing more than the antithesis to academic staff will probably be increasingly difficult. As argued by one of our interviewees, the main growth in today’s university sector occurs in ‘organisational interspaces’, non-traditional areas that override disciplinary boundaries. Far from all administrative professionals operate in this world but many do, including our interviewees. Thus they are part of a general movement that has a real bearing on academic life. Likewise if universities are moving in the direction of becoming strategic actors, and administrative professionals are intrinsically linked to this development, then they will come into the spotlight too.

Ultimately, this is a question of power. The senior administrative role is open to criticism in that it has informal power but rarely holds formal responsibility. As we have seen, the interviewees are highly aware of this and tread carefully as they ‘walk the talk’. Being seen to promote personal agendas, they fear, would be detrimental to their careers and to the trust that they have built up within the university. Working for the common goals of the university and for the views and decisions made by management is their preferred stance. This may seem a safer route, but it is not necessarily so. It may be equally provocative. Critics of what is viewed as a managerial turn in higher education are also often critical of the administrative professionals that serve such purposes. Loyalty to management is not a positive trait in all quarters.

In this study, we have shed new light on the strategic role of administrative professionals in Swedish higher education. We have touched briefly upon the tensions involved in their professional practice and upon issues of identity and culture. These are issues that merit more research. Here, we have focused on commonalities amongst the group of administrators. There is also a need to understand differences and possible hierarchies between different groups of administrators, in terms of specialist areas and job specifications. Likewise, differences between universities and potential linkages to local culture would be worth exploring. Furthermore, our study only gives one side of the story: the administrative professionals’ perspective. While we prioritised this because it is under-researched, we also see a need to hear the views of academic staff and/or university leaders. We anticipate that future studies will build on ours in this respect.

It has been our aim to provide more knowledge about the role of administrative professionals in contemporary higher education. We hope that this, in turn, can promote increased mutual understanding between the various stakeholders involved in higher education. Issues of power notwithstanding, we are convinced that informed and constructive dialogue is the best way to further the aims of a university – whatever they may be.

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