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## Book Part

### Chapter 4.3 Professional Staff in Support Services in Education and Research – How to Connect Research with Practice

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## Chapter 4.3

# Professional Staff in Support Services in Education and Research – How to Connect Research with Practice

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### Abstract

This chapter provides first insights into identities and communities of educational staff in one of the largest, multi-campus universities in Italy. This group of managers refers to those supporting teaching and learning in the light of emerging demands from the European strategy for universities which is positioning education at the frontline in today's higher education institutions (HEIs).

These insights are compared with common issues surveyed among research managers and administrators (RMAs) working in the same as well as in other international HEIs using Evans' 'restricted' and 'extended' models of professionalism.

Among findings, educational managers (EM) show awareness of their identity only as 'professionals' while RMAs may feel like 'hybrid' profiles. Unlike RMAs, EM report not having a strong sense of belonging to one community but feeling like they belong to a plethora of groups. In conclusion, there are no

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dominant ‘extended’ or ‘restricted’ traits for any of the two groups and they have both these attitudes to a certain extent as the results of this chapter will further explain.

*Keywords:* Educational support managers; RMAs; dissemination; identity; community; engagement

## 1. Introduction and Background

The contemporary higher education (HE) sector can be depicted globally as a very complex working environment (Barnett, 2008; Callender et al., 2020; Clark, 1983, 2008; Connell, 2019). This overview embraces a worldwide pandemic, with implications from the move from more traditional to hybrid forms of teaching and learning; an unpredictable war now in the core of Europe, with effects spreading to the university level incl. internationally. These points, combined with recurrent, long-term challenges posed by climate change, social inequalities, and with new waves of unrests driven by geopolitical trends that seem unstoppable in the short as well as in the long run, may seem like insurmountable challenges.

These issues emphasise the opportunities surfacing in a post-pandemic world to move towards more flexible, less in-person, hybrid forms of educational programmes to meet students’ emerging demands. In addition, the post-Covid environment has paved the way for a long list of opportunities in the use of technologies, the adoption of hybrid forms of learning and skill development (Baré et al., 2021; Callender et al., 2020; Coates et al., 2020), and in the transformation of the global hybrid model of HE.

Today’s HE has experienced an unprecedented period of unrest and criticism (Callender et al., 2020; Connell, 2019; Heller, 2022) and of unparalleled complexity, which Barnett would describe using the expression ‘supercomplexity’. Herewith not only stressing the ever-changing and challenging environment (Barnett, 2008, p. 2017), but also to highlight how all our frameworks to understand and navigate the sector have failed.

Within this turbulent environment, the role of education in universities has progressively changed, moving to a frontline role in the space of a few years. In this regard, the European Strategy for Universities published earlier in 2022 (European Commission, 2022a) calls for establishing synergies while breaking down silos between education and research missions (European University Association – EUA, 2021). This can be done by establishing European Universities or EUAs as ‘transnational alliances that will lead the way towards the universities of the future, promoting European values and identity, and revolutionising the quality and competitiveness of European higher education’ (European Education Area<sup>1</sup>). In doing so, today’s universities seek not only to be entrepreneurial, ecological, and sustainable as recommended by several scholars (Barnett, 2017; Clark, 1998; Connell, 2019; Heller, 2022) but even strategically and synergically interwoven.

All these points may explain how education, which refers not only to learning and teaching (EUA, 2021) but also to students’ support and affairs, is nowadays at

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<sup>1</sup><https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

a crucial intersection. The above-mentioned issues come together and demand to be addressed appropriately.

In this ever-changing context, EM are among those professional staff supporting teaching and learning; specifically, those aiming at supporting academics even in the design and delivery of these teaching and learning programmes; those likely to contribute to make students' achievements and learning smooth and feasible; those who more often strive to balance demands from academics with regulations from their institutions and central regulatory bodies.

EM therefore strive to keep the pace of changes and challenges in today's HE sector and represent the core group depicted in this chapter, as compared with other professional groups in the sector. And this professional group may even include some activities carried out by the sub-group of RMAs in some contexts or institutions; this will depend on the organisational structure, on the size of the institution, and also on the proximity that has been choosing between education and research support.

This chapter was designed at the time of collecting data as part of a new training programme to strengthen the capability of EM to cope with the surge of complexity at the University of Bologna (Unibo) also in the light of the ongoing pandemic. During the pandemic, we collected data and then moved on to analyse the data to fulfil the design of our training programme; at the same time, we began comparing some results with data from RMA groups at Unibo as well as with different European HEIs.

## **2. Who Do They Think They Are? Coming to Know EM**

This chapter begins by explaining the university reforms that have affected Unibo since 2011. Later, the focus will switch to HE professionals working in educational support services at Unibo, their identities, and communities. It will also include insights into the working relationships with peers in other professional services and with academics.

To start, an excursus of the most recent university reforms restructuring the organisational structure at Unibo will be described since these may have influenced the current identities of different professional groups.

### ***2.1. Unibo and Three Waves of Organisational Reforms***

As one of the oldest universities in the western world, Unibo was founded back in 1088 with no classrooms nor library. Beginning in 2011, a period of rapid change began as the university was affected by several major waves of reform. In 2012, 70 research departments merged to become 33 (now 32); contextually, faculties were restructured and so replaced by schools as the leading units dealing with education and teaching.

In the following years, the 32 departments confirmed their status of research and research-related core units, while the 5 schools became the organisational units linking and coordinating their aggregated departments to support and streamline their programme offer.<sup>2</sup> These schools neither have financial resources allocated nor staff for educational support services anymore.

Thus, educational support services and their staff were taken away from these schools and became independent units reporting to the director of the education division in the central administration. These organisational units have been named Educational Services sub-divisions, literally from Italian *filiera*, 'food supply chains',

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.unibo.it/en/university/campuses-and-structures/schools/schools>

referring to the agricultural cultural heritage of the Emilia Romagna region in which Bologna lies.

These organisational units, are new physical and organisational structures that do not correspond to anything existing in the current HE system, at national level at least; this point serves to emphasise their distinctiveness in the sector. According to Clark (1983), some of the distinctive features of universities are their ‘uniqueness’ and ‘differentiation’ and, with respect to its *filiera*, Unibo is pretty unique among Italian HEIs.

In this renewed organisational structure, we find schools and departments, which may vary in size and level of cross-disciplinarity, led by presidents and heads of department, respectively. While the new units of educational support services, now sub-divisions of the educational division in the central administration, do not have any link with the traditional academic structure anymore but are functionally dependent on the director of the education division.

Under the restructured university depicted above, also in the light of the European Strategy for Universities, the role of educational support managers has to be completely reshaped. More than ever before these managers are expected to gain an understanding of themselves, including the knowledge available on their roles and identities, and develop their potential in the ever-changing domain of HE.

## **2.2. Who Do They Think They Are? Insights into the Community of HE Professionals in Educational Support Services**

The leading research questions underlying this chapter are the following: *How do these educational professionals describe their identities and communities?*

Additional questions, as part of a larger study only partially included here, are: *What are the key relationships and the primary alliances that they see at stake in today's education? What spaces do they occupy – professional, academic, or even hybrid spaces – and where do they find their professional communities? Do they see supercomplexity in the working spaces they occupy and if so, why?*

The EM we are referring to may come from a variety of background and professions, including research, other sectors, teaching in secondary schools, among others; they are part of a hybrid, wide community of professional staff, and HE professionals (Caldwell, 2022; Deem et al., 2010; Enders & Naidoo, 2022; Gornall, 1999; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010; Harland, 2012; Henkel, 2010; Middlehurst, 2010; Warren, 2018; Whitchurch, 2008a, 2010a, 2010b, 2018). This broad group is to be intended as the overarching community of those performing a variety of professional roles and functions in today's HEIs.

Thus, the challenges depicted above illustrate that EM are under unprecedented pressure these days; they may be regarded as the frontrunners or even as change makers of an educational, future landscape of HE. To succeed, they need support to equip themselves with top level management tools and skills as well as an innovative up-to-date attitude of professionalism (European Commission, 2022a; Poli, 2022b) to cope with the supercomplexity of times that lie ahead.

## **2.3. EM as Another Professional Group in Today's HEIs and a Sub-community of the Workforce of HE Professionals**

Within this challenging context, EM represent one of the under-researched professional groups populating today's HEIs. Specifically, regarding EM, the body of

knowledge on this professional group is scarce and dispersed (Parkes et al., 2014). However, it became clear in 2021 at the time of designing the training programme that we could not count on any report or work of similar kind conducted at Unibo in previous years on these HE professionals. While several professional networks had been active in developing training and related activities at the national level, such as Comenio Didattica & Management.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, professional profiles in HE had already some attention in Italian studies, see, for example, Simone (2017). This study, however, appears to some extent more explicative and informative rather than academic or inquisitive. This confirms the ongoing need for investigating the role of staff involved in educational services even only in professional terms or for a specific audience.

### 3. Methods

The questions listed above were posed to a pool of 15 EM, all working in the education division and its support services. This study was meant not only to train but also to share knowledge among themselves through the body of research covering the entire community of HE professionals (Gornall, 1999; Kehm, 2015; Middlehurst, 2010; Whitchurch, 2006, 2018). Within the spectrum of the training, aspects on roles and identities, communities, the domain of education, as well as the relationships with peers and academics were key issues.

To analyse the data, we used a qualitative design of enquiry based on a set of unstructured interviews and, in a second phase, on thematic deductive coding analysis (Punch, 2012; Scott, 2012).

Methodologically, we relied on phenomenology as the mode of understanding social phenomena from an actor's perspective; this means that these actors – here the EM – are expected to describe the world as the reality they experience in the way they perceive it to be (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The core point of this phenomenological approach is for individuals to describe what they experience or perceive rather than to explain or analyse what they experience.

Therefore, we first conducted focussed interviews (Bell, 2012; Robson, 2011), which were meant to be interviews that are neither strictly structured with standardised questions nor entirely nondirective. By this means, respondents could describe what they experience as well as to raise or even explore unexpected themes (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Mason, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews with the 15 EM, working in the central administration and in local educational support offices, were conducted between December 2021 and March 2022, exclusively in an online mode. More specifically, the sample consisted of five junior staff members and ten senior staff members, of whom four were males and eleven females, while ten of the staff members worked in local offices (*filiere*) and five in the education division.

Next, we moved on to analyse the data firstly manually focussing on deductive codes and later on using the qualitative software NVivo (version 14). In the first round of analysis, we grouped the responses, the predetermined and the emerging themes in an overarching, simplified table (Table 4.3.1). While in the second round, we focussed

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.comeniodm.it/>

Table 4.3.1. Themes Covered (Predetermined in the Interview Guide).

Theme Covered (Predetermined in the Interview Guide)	EM	Insightful Points and Quotes	Emerging Themes (from Interviews)
Identity	Education is the most engaging; and I feel the facilitator of the whole lifecycle in education	<i>We are the punching balls in the organisation of today's education. (R4)</i>	<i>I feel like the joining link in the educational system</i>
Community	Unibo, faculty, school, and also the informal community of practice of experts in educational services set up locally (group of experts of educational support services)	<i>I feel just an UniBO employee, that's it! (R13)</i>	<i>All and nothing</i>
The space in today's Education is ...	Fragile, dynamic, multifaceted, varied, complex, confused, and innovative	<i>I don't know them [what they do], and so I don't talk with them either [staff working in different functions and admin divisions]. (R2)</i>	<i>Fragile, confused, innovative, but not boring at all</i>
Third spaces of collaboration	I spot this space from a distance	<i>It's hard to identify it but I know that this space exists out there. (R3)</i>	<i>There're lots of these spaces around here</i>
Complexity	Widespread in today's education and on the rise. But also, schizophrenic	<i>It's all fragmented in a very high number of contact persons/points at present. (R14)</i>	<i>Schizophrenic education</i>
Relations and key alliances	Tensions with academics are seldom reported but cannot be lacking	<i>I am here, count on me and my high-quality provision of support services! (R7)</i>	<i>I am here for you, use me, please!</i>
Evolution of the profession	Several stages of this evolution have gone on in recent years	<i>Our role has moved to be more a role of coordination than never before. (R14)</i>	<i>Coordinating professional, sort of intermediary</i>

Notes: R stands for respondent and the number for the number of the interview this respondent took part.



on repetitions, similarities, and differences, as well as on indigenous categories to identify possible new themes arising from the dataset (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

This two-step analysis, carried out manually and through NVivo,<sup>5</sup> was expected to help us design the programme with up-to-date research on the group and to enable EM to familiarise themselves with findings on their emerging community and their identities. Even looking at visible and invisible challenges that may lie ahead of them.

#### **4. Shedding Light on EM While Comparing Them with Research Managers**

This section compares the results of the overview above of EM with previous studies conducted on RMAs at Unibo in previous years. The dataset on RMAs dates back to 2016 (Poli et al., 2016) when RMAs working at the London School of Economics and at Tilburg University had been compared (Kurt-Dickson et al., 2018; Poli et al., 2016; Siesling et al., 2017). This dataset was updated and completely re-analysed for this chapter in the light of the comparison with EM.

For this comparison, we chose to rely on Evans' 'restricted' and 'extended' models of professionalism as the conceptual framework. The former group stands for those, firstly described by Evans among schoolteachers and then educational researchers, who have a narrow vision of their context while accepting their field of practice with no criticism; they are more likely to resist changes and to lack any interest in wider educational and social issues. While the latter group, of the so-called 'extended' professionals is that of reflective and analytical individuals, including those doing some research also on their topic. They strive to improve their practice through lifelong learning and research into their field of practice (Evans, 2002, 2008; Hoyle, 2012).

The choice of this framework came from the consideration that there is a growing body of literature covering RMAs, while there is less knowledge describing EM, their identities, and communities. The point above means that the community of RMAs is already visible globally, in the professional and academic literature, for example; and that this degree of visibility may even be higher than any other professional community in HE and research institutions. This visibility also means that the knowledge we have acquired on this professional group has already been disseminated quite a lot within the community so to enable RMAs to know more about themselves and their positioning in the research field.

With this latter point that resonates with Evans (2002), when she envisions the 'restricted' model appropriate for more junior staff, those more likely to show less awareness of who they are, and the 'extended' one for more senior staff, expected to be RMAs here. Along the models postulated by Evans (2002), EM may be less aware of themselves and belong to the 'restricted' and more junior category while RMAs may know more about themselves and fall into the 'extended' category and more senior staff. However, we acknowledge that this model is more likely to represent a spectrum of possibilities with different levels of professionalism, that is, professionals are more likely to exhibit some characteristics throughout the spectrum of the model and do not fall into either the 'restricted' or the 'extended' category.

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<sup>4</sup>This table is not available yet so not included in the results of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup>Version 12.



#### 4.1. Community

In the university context, academics have their particular academic tribes and territories to which they belong to; these communities consist of beliefs, styles of communication, artefacts, and working spaces. The different disciplines have their own tribes and frameworks of understanding as well as codified knowledge to rely on (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Nevertheless, staff in professional services may not have a clear sense of belonging and may strive to find their communities within their institution. Some authors have even suggested to position the community of EM in the role that professional staff hold or in the University Centre (Caldwell, 2022; Whitchurch, 2010b).

On one hand, when inquired about their communities, EM argue that:

I don't know other professional staff at my university, I mean I don't know what they do [even meaning how their job may affect or interact with mine], and so I don't talk with them either [staff working in different functions and admin divisions]. (Resp#7EM)

This statement refers to the lack of knowledge of what other managers from other divisions and offices do and results in a feeling of lacking connection and the clear feeling of belonging to a community of professional staff. What clearly emerges is the wish to further know what other colleagues do, connect with other managers from various communities of HE professional at Unibo apart from those in educational services.

On the other hand, the importance for RMAs to belong to their professional community within the research division, to the university central administration, is clearly rationalised, their workplace is even regarded as an ideal workplace for all RMAs at Unibo (Kurt-Dickson et al., 2018; Poli et al., 2016; Siesling et al., 2017). Interestingly, in some statements, issues of prestige and reputation were reported to explain why the Centre may be regarded as that sort of ideal workplace. Thus, the research division was regarded as the place to find peers since peers

are only those within ARIC [the research division], ... ARIC is the ideal workplace to get visibility and top your reputation up. (Resp#5RM)

Regarding EM, this sense of having a community was instead less clear and unquestionable; EM, both those working centrally and locally, provided a wider, varied set of responses spanning from Unibo, the school, faculty, or also the informal community of practice gathering those in educational services locally. The reasons for having this variety of answers could be several: the recurrent reforms that have progressively transformed organisational life at Unibo; the feeling of not having a unique organisational culture within the division or the closer proximity to a more familiar professional group in educational settings; alternatively, the strong commitment to the entire university culture, or to a previous model of organisation for educational services, for example, a school, that would have been preferred.

I feel to belong to Unibo, that's it. (Resp#14EM)

In consideration of the variety of replies and communities identified as preferred, we may conclude that there is not one community to belong to for EM. In comparison, the replies collected from RMAs were extremely clear, for example:

[I feel strongly committed to this community] since this is the community that has provided me with career opportunities overall. (Resp#4RM)

From the results above, the identification with a community emerges as one of the core topics for those working in universities, not only for academics, but also for those in professional services particularly for RMAs. This comes to the fore as one of the lines of investigation still to be further explored.

#### **4.2. Identity**

Identity is a concept widely explored in universities particularly in academic settings (Barrow et al., 2022; Henkel, 2000, 2010). Recently, the concept has emerged as one of the core topics worth exploring for those in professional services (Caldwell, 2022; Henkel, 2010; Whitchurch, 2008a) even to scrutinise the community individually as well as collectively. In the present study, identity was a clear and straight definition for the majority of respondents as they showed a good grasp of the concept. This differs from previous studies, for example, from Caldwell (2022), where identity is regarded as an unexpected side among professional staff, even when it is not ambivalent in its definition.

On one hand, respondents in educational settings describe their identity clearly and instantaneously, seeming like promoters, servants as well as core players in education, and/or also those acting as facilitators of everyday connections. This last meaning is often intended as playing a linking role between the university boards and its departments, the people sitting in between the two sides and making their dialogue feasible. An extreme view also depicts these managers as ‘the punching balls’ so to stress their role of falling between opposite views or groups. Respondents may however also hold a highly specialised and multifaceted role, where identity comes to be regarded as

the capacity to develop adaptability to changing contexts or to different parts I’m working with at Unibo. (Resp#15EM)

This statement serves to illustrate the richness of features and capabilities. Although they seem to feel like they fall into the group of professional staff, they could not identify any hybrid or academic features in their group. They reported being aware of their identity and proud to call themselves ‘professionals’ and this contrasts with Caldwell (2022) on professional staff’ view of their ‘just’ an administrator identity.

On the other hand, once challenged on their blend of identities – professionals, academics, hybrid – RMAs claimed to be administrators, professionals, and potentially hybrid managers, but never academics (even though the majority of respondents held an academic title). Interestingly, though, they did not choose to call themselves only ‘professionals’ and this made clear their preference for sitting in the wide spectrum of identities ranging from ‘administrator’ to ‘hybrid’ professional so to be ‘professionals depending on occasion’ or also ‘those more likely to adapt [even their identity]

to changeable circumstances' (Resp#1RM). This latter point, which resonates with [Whitchurch \(2012\)](#), was made particularly clear by respondents at Unibo.

Looking at other insights (for example, see chapter 2.4 Poli et al., 2023) reflections on identity for RMAs often match the reasons they have come to and decided to remain in the profession. These reasons include societal and ethical issues arising from the proximity to research and/or from the contribution to society.

## 5. Conclusions

Unlike RMAs and their less clear-cut, strategic positioning depending on the situation to tackle (hybrid or professional depending on circumstances), EM identify themselves unequivocally as professional staff. Additionally, even when these EM do not have a unique community, they report their key alliances in a wider university setting, specifically in departments and any sort of educational support units, including informal networks as communities of practice set up locally with other EM to support each other.

### 5.1. *Professional Tribes, Elite Communities, or a Plethora of Communities?*

Among the further points that emerge from our comparative analysis, we see that RMAs more often have a clear sense of belonging to a precise, unique, restricted community; in the Unibo case, for example, this community is a prestigious one, the research division.

Unlike RMAs, EM tend to have a wider and more varied community they belong to within the whole university; with a plethora and variety of communities that could be the result of recurrent reorganisations taking place at Unibo.

Since both groups of professionals – RMAs and EM at Unibo – work in the central administration of the university, the organisational culture of central administration may differ from that of local departments ([Santos et al., 2021a](#)). The findings on RMAs may therefore support and complement [Whitchurch's](#) findings ([Caldwell, 2022](#)) on professional staff more likely to identify with the institution when working in the central administration.

In this regard, while RMAs clearly and unanimously point to their respected inner community, which could even remind us of the academic tribes depicted by [Becher and Trowler \(2001\)](#), EM display a varied, wide range of communities they belong to. In this regard, EM could be regarded as those having more holistic views than RMAs or even a wider organisational-minded view.

### 5.2. *Final Remarks*

In conclusion, the chapter highlights that EM consider working in educational services as extremely challenging and exciting; in addition, they show they can, with no ambiguity or hesitation, position their identity in the university context. Unlike RMAs, EM do not refer to any ethical reasons or proximity with the domain of education as one of the reasons for being pleased by their job. They rather highlight complexity and ambiguity as the major forces inhabiting today's educational domain at Unibo.

Differently from RMAs, EM do not have a strong sense of belonging to one professional community and, on the contrary, they feel to belong to a wider range of university communities. Again, it seems that RMAs may be regarded as the first 'professional tribe' having their spaces and territories, for example, the research division at Unibo;

and so these RMAs seldom report any commitment to wider associations or networks, this point may have multiple causes, for example, the lack of national association, only recently established, see Chapter 4.4 (Romano et al., 2023), but also cultural attitudes rooted in the HE sector where HE professionals may not be to join networks and so act collectively. Used as those from other countries, from the UK or USA, for example, for acting collectively (Poli, 2013).

From all the points above, we see that both educational and research managers show ‘extended’ attitudes, while the ‘restricted’ ones are less likely to come up as dominant traits of one of the two professional groups; however, traits of ‘restricted’ features can be found among both groups, for EM in relation to the vague and imprecise definition of their communities, and for RMAs for their close circle of peers likely to be found in the local community, as it is evident in the Unibo case, which may favour proximity and sometimes disregard wider networking opportunities.

### **5.3. Recommendations**

In the final point of this chapter, our vision would recommend for the professional groups supporting education and research to move closer one another; this would be good for several reasons, for example, to follow the European strategy for universities and its suggestion of breaking silos between core functions, to strengthen transnational collaborations, and to foster knowledge exchange and contamination among professional groups.

As a preliminary step, therefore, this vision should encourage the design of joint training between the two professional groups in education and research; and this should be done not only among those working within the same institution but also among those in different universities of the same EUA or across different, more international HEIs.

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