



## Future HE Professionals

### Insights from Stakeholders

The AUA has a heritage of 60 years *connecting and developing higher education professionals* in support of the UK higher education.

Looking ahead to the next phase in AUA's development, this report is one output from a collaborative project led by AUA during 2019-20: **Future HE Professionals**.

The project included background research, a sector-wide survey which attracted more than 2000 responses, and wide-ranging stakeholder consultation. Overall project aims were to:

- Identify future development needs – the skills and attributes to equip professional services for the changing future of HE
- Understand how professional services roles are developing in the context of a changing HE sector
- Support the continued success of UK higher education.

**Future HE Professionals** was commissioned and directed by the AUA Board of Trustees. Project delivery was supported by AUA Consulting.

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### Insights from Stakeholders

This report considers feedback received in the stakeholder consultation phase of *Future HE Professionals* during April-May 2020. For the most part the consultation focused on themes which had emerged in earlier stages of the project, with the addition of considerations relating to longer term implications of the Coronavirus pandemic. Around forty representatives of HE institutions and HE sector organisations participated in the consultation, across a combination of interviews, discussions and focus groups.

## The Future of Work

1. We asked consultation participants to comment on the future of work 'megatrends' identified in the research phase of Future HE Professionals and further explored in the Future HE Professionals survey. Consultees overwhelmingly noted strong resonance with these themes, including comments such as "I absolutely agree with your synopsis". Some participants emphasised potentially negative ramifications in respect of the trends (eg considerations relating to equality/diversity) and highlighted the importance of harnessing the positive implications in each case.
2. Regarding technology, some respondents expressed a degree of caution viz the likely slower impact in HE compared with other sectors of the economy; the continued importance of human agency, particularly in academe; the purpose of a university being associated strongly with people and place; and that the sector might be a rather reluctant adopter. Attention was drawn to the need for (human) leadership capability to enable technology in a purposeful way (eg a blended approach). As such the professional and management need is not so much about operating technology but rather harnessing its benefits. Most consultation participants agreed that less physical workplace would be required in the future, with multi-purpose use being made of flexible facilities. The implications of flexible working for management culture and behaviours will need careful attention in future (eg managing at a distance).
3. Various points were highlighted in relation to future demographic trends including:
  - New entrants to the sector increasingly looking for employers who will invest in their development, and thus support their competitiveness in the labour market, in future.
  - The impact of pension reform on an extended working life.
  - Likely increased mobility in the workforce: as such we might be better to think in terms of 'future professionals in HE' rather than 'future HE professionals'.
  - Evidence already identified that the emerging workforce will be more likely to be drawn to sectors/employers/roles based on differential terms and conditions, including flexibility in working patterns, commitment to sustainability, etc.
4. Consultees recognised likely implications from the growth in the 'Gig' economy and similar trends, with some caution expressed that the practical impacts are likely to be differential in HE on the basis of institution type and location/region. Key points made in the consultation exercise include the following:
  - The likelihood of a generally more diverse workforce in future, incorporating consultants, partners, sub-contractors, out-sourcing, sector-supply agencies, etc alongside traditional employees.

- The desirability of a flexible workforce to mitigate single point/s of failure (particularly in small institutions); to bring in fresh perspectives; to cover off specific expertise in project work, etc.
- That the HE professional services 'ecosystem' would benefit from greater flexibility eg fewer hierarchical layers, more management empowerment, clarity around accountability; stronger risk appetite, etc.
- How enhanced flexibility in employment practice can support more creative recruitment with a view to securing/retaining the very best talent within the sector.

## **Professional Services Career Pathways**

5. Survey respondents indicated some concern around institutional commitment to development needs in the professional services, including a perceived absence of defined professional career pathways. Participants in the consultation generally agreed that higher education needs a greater focus in future on strategic workforce planning/succession planning/talent management and that current such thinking in the professional services community is particularly patchy. Points highlighted include the following:
  - The risks for the sector associated with an 'hourglass' workforce concept emphasise the need for more attention in the area of organisational development, particularly in respect of middle management (aka "aspiring" professionals). In practice, future challenges around institutional financial sustainability might force the issue towards more systematic workforce planning.
  - The need for proactive personal career management rather than an expectation for employer-led mapping of an internal career pathway. Individuals need to take the lead responsibility and managers share a responsibility to support reflection and to provide development opportunities. In the words of one consultee: "assumptions from staff that their career can progress by doing the same job year after year and waiting for someone more senior to leave/retire need to be challenged".
  - Tools/templates/models/case studies are important in the career pathway mapping process, particularly to ensure individuals and institutions are equipped to draw the most benefit from this approach.
  - The positive benefits of career pathways as a means of drawing younger entrants into the profession, to aid retention of the best talent, and to promote equality and diversity.
  - The importance of avoiding any "one size fits all" approach such that career pathways are a hybrid blend of the mapped out and the individualised.
  - Career pathways conceptualised as a 'climbing frame not a ladder', recognising the desirability of moves in/out/across: flexibility being fundamental.

- That any support around pathway mapping must emphasise the overriding importance of professional skills development not longevity or ‘time served’.
- A general agreement that comparisons into the HE academic promotion pathway are unhelpful and invalid.

### **Future Development Needs in Professional Services**

6. Consultation discussions reinforced views about future development priorities already suggested by the research phase of Future HE Professionals and affirmed by survey respondents, including the comment that ‘development is everything’. The following areas were singled out for particular importance in future:

- Networking and peer support as the bedrock of professional development and professional credibility, including the opportunity to learn from others. Practical schemes like job shadowing, coaching and mentoring should be available, tailored as appropriate, at every organisational level.
- The increasing relevance of professional resilience to promote positive health and wellbeing – what one consultee described as “work-life management” (rather than “work-life balance”) including assertiveness to challenge an ‘always on’ culture and the permission to set boundaries. Some stakeholders emphasised the contribution of this concept in encouraging diversity to support high performing teams.
- That professional agility will be important in the context of increased cross-functional/multi skilled working and reduced job demarcation/silo working, noting the associated management implications (eg institutions may need to overhaul their approach to professional development and reward to foster a mindset/behaviours supporting flexibility/adaptability).

### **Future Roles for HE Professional Organisations**

7. Consultation interviews and discussions touched on the likely contributions to be made by HE professional organisations into the future, including the role of AUA, and particularly thinking of the pressures ahead for the sector. Among the points made were the following:

- An important role for HE professional associations to provide thought leadership/professional reports/horizon scanning for the benefit of the professional services community.
- The importance of globalisation within an association’s member services offering, both taking account of Brexit and the impact of the pandemic.
- An important role for professional organisations in supporting career moves into/out of the HE sector.
- The opportunity for closer collaboration across the c75 HE organisations, considering the current likely duplicated effort (and inadvertent gaps in

provision), future pressures around financial sustainability and the increasing trend towards professional leadership roles with a broad strategic remit.

- A particular need for support among professional services staff based in faculties/schools, thinking of career/progression routes and the need to overcome silo working.
- IT providing the opportunity to repackage training delivery to reach a significantly larger group (eg webinars, digital networks, blended delivery) and also with costs and sustainability in mind. A challenge regarding the undoubted benefits arising from in-person informal networking/peer support.

## **Implications of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

8. While acknowledging the pressing immediate demands within the Coronavirus emergency (noting that consultation interviews, discussions and focus groups took place during April/May 2020), we asked stakeholders whether their experience of the pandemic suggested particular areas of priority with implications for HE professionals in the longer term. Various points were highlighted, some of which reinforce issues already discussed above.
  - A likely acceleration of the pace of change regarding technology development – “the sector will not go back” (eg in the area of online learning).
  - Additional scrutiny regarding the value-added of professional services: leaner services reflecting reduced funding and job losses/institutional closure or mergers in the future; increased amalgamation/collaboration in professional services roles/need for flexibility.
  - Potentially a greater recognition of the role of professional services, demonstrated in its contribution supporting institutional resilience during the pandemic emergency. And the importance of deep partnership working with academics.
  - A more business orientated direction of travel into the future: more fleet of foot; more relentless pace (“it will be about survival”).
  - Greater emphasis on risk management and future-proofing in HE activity.
  - A much more positive approach to flexible ways of working (eg working from home), including awareness of the associated wellbeing issues and the opportunity of more time (but probably less money) available for professional development. Conversely the way in which home working might negatively highlight inefficiencies in existing working patterns.
  - A renewed global outlook in the context of changing patterns of student recruitment and geo-political shifts (eg UK relationship with China).
  - Further emphasis on the student experience through a period of disruption – with a potential long fall-out (“students as customers”, VFM issues, student complaints, CMA expectations, etc).
  - New academic delivery models/differential delivery with implications for professional services teams.



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