

Striking a balance...

The changing face of administrative support

The recent survey by NIESR has flagged what we all know about higher education: that it is increasingly demanding of its academic staff in terms of administrative functions.

This situation, which has been exacerbated over at least the last decade, is easy to track back to the increases in corporate level assessment exercises, evaluation and measurement processes plus the escalating responsibilities for higher education institutions of a wide range of procedures connected with student assessment, recruitment and enrolment.

Administrative responsibilities were always destined to become more complex, but the way in which the sector has responded has been varied and has, in itself, resulted in some new trends within our organisations.

NEW CONCERNS, NEW IMPERATIVES...

Apart from the dominating issues addressed within the survey, about the need to readjust the balance between teaching, research and administration among academic staff, four key implications can be identified which will need to be on the planning agenda for all forwardthinking institutions in the future.

These centre on:

- [1] The professionalisation of higher education administration
- [2] The need for academic staff to be adequately supported
- [3] The rise in competitive levels of administrative support as a differentiator in corporate employer brand
- [4] The danger of removing academic staff completely from involvement with some administrative functions.

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

There has been a surge in both the acknowledgement of the need to professionalise higher education administrative functions plus approaches to making this happen in the last five years. Key benchmarks have been set by the AUA, with new initiatives such as the Institute of Education MBA for HE managers and the establishment of the LFHE adding to the mix.

The days when specialists in administration were rare has changed beyond all recognition and the landscape of higher education is populated by specialists and offers career paths across many administrative disciplines.

SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC STAFF

The need to appropriately support academic staff is an increasingly critical issue and one that has been **"resource heavy"** for many higher education institutions. As imperatives for academic staff have changed, new fields of specialist support have been developed, with the establishment of functions to manage the assessment exercises, research functions and knowledge transfer being the tip of an administrative iceberg. This, in itself, has changed the breadth and scope of administrative functions within institutions and has altered forever the way in which organisations need to plan for, manage and recruit their specialist administrative staff.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AS EMPLOYER BRAND DIFFERENTIATOR

Institutions that view investment in specialist administrative support as a means of enabling all staff plus the organisation to operate more effectively are showing the way forward: NTU has made this clear with an emphasis on building a professional administrative body to help deliver success for all across the organisation.

Increasingly, the levels of support and service available to academic staff are used by organisations to **"woo"** potential academic appointments and so have become a major part of the employer brand proposition that can set apart one organisation, and its **"offer"** to a potential member of staff, from another.

A WORD OF CAUTION...

It is worth being cautious, however. Time and time again, the value of maintaining links between academic staff, even if only at a nominal level, and some of the key functions within an organisation, has been proved to be imperative to success. This is especially true for issues connected with student recruitment and enrolment, where contact with academic staff, the **"deliverers"** of the teaching and research aspects of the higher education experience, is known to make a measurable difference to issues such as the conversion of enquiries to enrolments.

So, while organisations plan for their administrative futures, it will be wise to ensure that there are still areas where the academic and administrative functions continue to mesh.

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