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Public engagement professionals in a prestige economy: Ghosts in the machine.

Richard Watermeyer¹ and Gene Rowe²

Abstract

Over the last decade there has been significant investment made by a UK higher education policy and funding community in embedding ‘public engagement’ within British universities. While some public engagement is undertaken by university staff, - often on a voluntary and unpaid basis (Viewforth 2018) - much is carried out by public engagement professionals (PEPs), typically from within professional services divisions. Institutional leadership for this activity is liable to be complicated by interactions between academic and non-academic staff, although the nature of relationships between these and their impact on the success of engagement has been unclear. The following account, based upon a multi-site case study of institutional leadership for public engagement, accordingly considers, through a Bourdieusian lens, the challenges faced by PEPs as ‘non-academics’ working within the UK’s university sector as a ‘prestige economy’ (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011). It reveals their struggle to gain a professional parity of esteem with academics, and how the discrediting of their expertise by the latter forms a challenge to their leadership and thus their displacement within universities as highly stratified organisations. Ergo, we find the evanescent of public engagement as a formal institutional commitment.

Introduction

The last ten years has seen a major commitment by the UK higher education policy and funding community towards embedding public engagement as a core activity of British universities; with public engagement taken to mean “the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public” (NCCPE 2020). Policy advocates understand engagement as a driver and enabler of socio-economic impact, which has resulted in its appropriation as an albeit contested aspect of performance evaluation (Watermeyer and Hedgecoe 2016) and, since 2014, a component of the UK’s performance-based research funding system, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (*cf.* NCCPE 2017).

While public engagement is often undertaken by academic staff – often on a voluntary and unpaid basis (Viewforth 2018) – the conduct, organisation and leading of its activities often appears to be underpinned by public engagement professionals (PEPs), typically operating within professional services divisions, in many ways socially, culturally, and physically removed from academics. ‘Fault-lines’ (Middlehurst 1993; Rowland 2002) between universities’ academic and professional services communities are attributable, despite an economic argument for improved harmonisation, to the quasi-marketisation of universities and the privilege now afforded to performance management (Carasso and Brown 2013; Collini 2017), which has in turn parented an epidemic of hyper-competitiveness and stratification (*cf.* Kwiek 2019) and consequent propelling of university staff – especially academics – towards an ethic of intensive productivity and suspicion of any intervening organisational actor or agenda that might disrupt the flow of tangible outputs as positional goods (Hirsch 1977). A chase for prestige among university members (*cf.* Blackmore 2016;

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Blackmore and Kandiko 2011) consequently causes their segregation into closed communities differentiated by a respective abundance or shortfall of claims to performance excellence and their capacity to deliver positional goods. The prestige economy of higher education, much as any system of entrepreneurial capitalism, thus recognises and rewards most generously those whose stage is highest set in the acquisition and accumulation of goods coveted by the university, while neglecting the efforts of others, whose contributions are more humble, less conspicuous and/or connected to less institutionally advantageous returns. Thus, as Kwiek (2020) observes, where prestige in universities is primarily associated with research, or more specifically research income generation and publication in high profile journals, and not teaching or service missions, recognition for PEPs as professional service staff – and thus public engagement – remains low and difficult to challenge. The limits of PEPs' contribution to prestige making in universities, is accordingly, as we will discuss, the cause of their occupational precarity.

A sense of displacement among professional service staff and their 'otherness' (McInnis 1998), often as imposed and accentuated by academic staff as those with a greater abundance of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1988) is perhaps hardest felt among those with research credentials, especially those with postgraduate and doctoral level qualifications, who are a growing constituency within professional service divisions. These are individuals once embedded within the academic world, yet who now, despite remaining within the employment of the university and in proximity of academics, are treated as anything but and distinctly less-than their academic counterparts (Whitchurch 2012). Further still for those with doctoral level qualifications, there is a tendency to be viewed as *failed* academics, and thus 'non-academics' operating to a different set of occupational values and, therefore, identity traits. For instance, while an academic self-concept is defined by disciplinary affiliation or intellectual project (Delamont *et al.* 1994), the self-concept of non-academics is assumed to emerge from institutional affiliation (Seyd 2000). However, for many (academically credentialed) professional service staff, an intellectual commitment and impulse remains strong, and their self-concept not nearly so neat as this bifurcation suggests. They are then a professional cadre who transgress occupational spheres and blend forms of knowledge and expertise otherwise stored in ritualistic silos. They are also a cadre, who despite prejudice, manage to exploit and wield their academic credentials as a necessary form of symbolic capital.

Many PEPs working within universities, especially those with formal leadership roles, have both high-level academic credentials (often doctorates) and, therefore, disciplinary knowledge (habitually in STEM fields) in addition to extensive experience of and expertise in public engagement³. Indeed, for those with STEM backgrounds, they are uniquely positioned in being able to synergise so-called 'hard' knowledge with 'soft' practice in the generation of positional returns; significant especially where public engagement is routinely discredited for being 'soft' – and more tacitly, for being feminised – and well-intentioned as opposed to well-

³ While interpretations of what counts as public engagement in universities are varied, we use the definition provided by the NCCPE (2020) in characterising the work of PEPS, with public engagement being "the many and varied ways university staff and students engage with others outside the institution".

needed (Watermeyer 2015). They are also arguably well-rehearsed in many of the prejudices and discriminatory practices seen to affect many minorities suffering ‘spoiled identities’ (Goffman 1963) engaged in STEM disciplines (*cf.* NSF 2015). In fact, for some, exposure to such forms of injustice and inequality are the cause for them having left science for a ‘career’ in engagement (Watermeyer 2015). PEPs in universities are also disproportionately female – and reflect a similar if not quite so exaggerated gender bias in professional services – and are also despite being in leadership positions, in most instances considerably younger than other university leaders, especially the professoriate (the population of which tends to be significantly older and as already mentioned, predominantly male). The social profiling of PEPs – and arguably wider professional service staff – is important in so much as it further explains their difficulty in exercising credible leadership in universities and of getting their voice heard; the limitations of their ‘boundary-crossing’ (Suchman 1994); and the extent of their marginalisation and accordingly the persistence of public engagement within universities as a peripheral and potentially disappearing activity.

An explicit focusing on the gender dynamics of public engagement and its overall feminisation is, however, the subject of another ongoing study and not the core focus of this article, which is based on a multi-site institutional case study, and instead explores what we call the ‘boundary-blocks’ encountered by PEP-leads in their universities as institutions ‘striving for prestige’ (O’Meara and Bloomgarden 2011) and in the related yet more general terms of contested expertise. More precisely, our offering here is an empirical analysis of how public engagement expertise in professional service divisions is valued and recognised – or not – by academic staff and the implications of these value judgements for the future of public engagement as undertaken from within universities, where so much of its formal activity depends on the leadership provided by PEPs.

We apply a Bourdieusian (1994) field analysis to interrogate variations of *habitus* enacted across a university community and specifically as belonging to and distinguishing PEPs and academics, while acknowledging the internal heterogeneity of both groups. We consider how power differentials and an imbalance of *capital*, favouring academics (or more certainly, senior academics and senior university managers) and how analogously, in striving for prestige, their adherence to a principle of ‘competitive accountability’ (Watermeyer 2019), closes down the boundary-crossing necessary for the effective functioning of the university as a multi-constituent, and more so, socially responsible organisation.

With increasing role specialization in higher education contexts, knowledge and practice-based boundaries involving various new professionalized groupings and academics have proliferated. Akkerman and Bakker (2011: 133) describe such boundaries as ‘a sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction . . . [that] simultaneously suggest a sameness and continuity in the sense that within discontinuity two or more sites are relevant to one another in a particular way’. The challenge for PEPs is thus to transcend the discontinuities of institutional boundaries and mobilize public engagement as a ‘boundary object’ (Star and Griesemer 1989) and bridge to intersectional practices that involve academics and professional service staff. In this article, we accordingly consider the efficacy of public engagement as a boundary object and the extent to which the privileging of prestige in universities makes the sociocultural differences that distinguish and separate PEPs from academics insurmountable. We question, therefore, the extent to which stratification and

division stimulated by the fetishization of prestige in universities, operates as a 'boundary-block' for public engagement that undermines its practice and the authority of its leaders. More simply, our intention is to test the veracity of claims made by many research-intensive universities in terms of a formal commitment to civic responsibility and the public good, and the extent of their support or otherwise neglect of their internal professional communities committed to such mission.

It is also worth noting that our critique of professional leadership for public engagement in universities is significant for the extent to which it reflects a dearth of sociological inquiry involving the professional service community and specifically, the extent to which they suffer power imbalance and potential abuses of power. The under-representation or relative invisibility of such sociological analyses – particularly in the course of the last ten years (as an extant literature shows or at least reveals by its absence) where concerns of work-based precarity in higher education contexts have multiplied – is further reflective of the disinterest and potentially, even the disdain shown by academic (research) communities to their non-academic counterparts (Allen-Collinson 2006) and what Allen-Collinson (2007) has described as the 'invisibility of their work'. Moreover, we show the extent to which professional service staff are for the most part lacking voice or opportunity to contest the forms of inequality they are subject to, despite their numbers. Indeed, a closer examination of these numbers is salient and striking.

If we use our nine case-study universities as indicative of staff demographic trends in UK universities, we find a combined *non-academic* population for 2018/19 of n=36,295 (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he/characteristics>). This compares to a combined *academic* population of n=36,340 across the same universities. These combined totals reveal a tiny majority of just fifteen academic staff; though we also find that in six of the nine sampled universities, non-academics were the majority population. We also find the total number of *female* non-academic staff across the sampled institutions to constitute n=22,260 or 61% of the total number. Accordingly, if we were to generalise from these figures, we would find that non-academics constitute almost half of staff in large research elite universities and that the majority of these are female. This is a significant population to be absent from empirical analyses. Thus, that we as two male researchers are articulating this problem, is further indicative of the dearth of agency among professional service staff and by extension therefore, public engagement professionals in stating their claim. Our account is thus also an important reminder of the latency of labour-based inequality and the urgent need for research to compel organisational redress in universities, and not only at the level of their academic membership.

Methodology

Our study consisted of a multi-site case study (*cf.* Baxter and Jack 2008; Cresswell 2013; Yin 2009) of public engagement leadership across nine research elite UK universities via focus groups with relevant staff – specifically those with formal responsibility for undertaking public engagement activity. Institutions were sampled on the basis of being large leading research universities, as recognised by national research performance rankings, and in the context of them being frequent receivers of large sums of research and public engagement funding. Access to institutions was made by targeting institutional heads of public engagement who were co-opted as gatekeepers to wider institutional communities and whose contact details

were sourced from institutional websites. It is worth noting that there is considerable variation in the respective visibility of public engagement teams/units within institutional websites and of it being not always obvious where to find them. Most often, where dedicated webpages for public engagement do exist, these are found within content related to professional services divisions – and frequently, marketing and public relations offices. Some of the webpages list public engagement personnel and provide contact numbers or e-mails, others do not; justified, we would speculate, on the basis of high staff turnover. Curiously, we found that in some institutions where curation of a digital shopfront for public engagement was most invested, our penetration either in making initial contact or recruiting good numbers of focus group participants was at the same time the most limited; suggesting some divergence in outward presentation and internal organisation for and receptivity to discussing matters of public engagement.

Overall, we found significant variance in the response of target institutions further to them being invited to participate within the study. Of ten institutions initially targeted, four of those that ultimately participated were very responsive and their public engagement leads went to great effort in terms of recruiting good numbers of participants for the focus groups, finding and booking rooms, and even laying on lunches. In these institutions the quality of the focus groups tended to be high in terms of the data collected and the general openness of participants, displaying a wealth of institutional and sectoral knowledge and expertise pertaining to public engagement and an enthusiasm for dialogue, while recognizing the importance of these discussions in terms of furthering and ameliorating institutional agendas for public engagement. In other institutions, we gained access but this tended to be on the basis of lengthier negotiation. Three of our initially targeted institutions were abandoned and replaced using the same sample criteria. One of these failed to provide any response to our requests (despite numerous efforts and targeting of numerous individuals); one institution initially engaged with us and suggested a willingness to be involved, only for correspondence to entirely drop off with all our subsequent communications being ignored. One other of our targeted institutions refused from the outset to take part, claiming ‘research-fatigue’ and that a significant amount of research into public engagement involving its staff had already been undertaken. In another of our targeted institutions, timetabling a focus group was significantly delayed by a massive downsizing of its centralized public engagement unit to one part-time PEP. In this case, the focus group required sanctioning by the institution’s senior management team. What thus became clear from our access negotiations was how varied universities are in either welcoming or avoiding discussion of their public engagement activity; the prevalence of localised politics, political sensitivities and polarization within institutions in apropos public engagement; and a concern perhaps that through our study inconvenient truths pertaining to an institutional culture for public engagement would be surfaced.

The membership of our focus groups was reflective of a clear bias across our sampled universities in terms of who leads public engagement. The overwhelming majority of participants were identifiable for being within professional service roles and/or divisions. Of those that were explicitly identifiable as heads of institutional engagement units, who were also our institutional gatekeepers across the nine institutional contexts, four held doctorates. They were also all, with the exception of one institution, female. Of the nine focus groups undertaken, six were in English universities; two in Scottish universities; and one in a Welsh

university. In total we spoke to in excess of one hundred individuals with specialist knowledge of public engagement in research intensive university contexts. The majority of participants were PEPs, though our sample did include a small sub-sample of senior academics; a similarly small sub-sample of senior managers; and a handful of early career researchers. Our analysis focuses exclusively on the testimony of PEPs. The vast majority of those we spoke with had worked in a higher education context over a prolonged period of time (at least five years) and demonstrated strong institutional and sectoral knowledge.

With the consent of all participants, focus groups were recorded using two digital voice-recorders to ensure accurate data capture. The focus groups were facilitated by the two researchers/authors and typically ran for two hours, producing in total approximately 18 hours of interview data that was subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription agency. In addition, detailed field notes generated by the researchers captured visual and non-verbal aspects of discussions. A constructivist and inductive approach was taken to the thematic analysis and coding of data (*cf.* Merriam 2009). We sought to identify key themes within the data collected at and local to each site or case, from which we could generate not only an institutionally specific understanding of public engagement but commonality and divergence in respect of multiple institutional approaches and trends, and therefore a cross-case analysis of public engagement.

The focus groups sought to unpack participants' experiences as institutional leaders for public engagement and the various challenges – or, as we have theorised, 'boundary-blocks' – they encounter in such context. While the study was conceived as an attempt to map a leadership ecosystem for public engagement in universities, an inductive analysis of the data led us to concentrate our focus on an issue of cultural dissonance involving PEPs and academics engendered by performance-based stratification and a turn towards competitive accountability. In making sense of these accounts we drew on Bourdieusian concepts of 'capital' and 'fields' as markers defining and contributing to an understanding of the social dynamics affecting public engagement professionalism within universities (Bourdieu 1988, 1983; see also Naidoo 2004; Rowlands 2017). We also adapted a concept of boundary-crossing, which we call 'boundary-blocks' to describe how unequal forms of capital involving academics and professional service staff are injurious to leadership for public engagement in research elite universities. The following discussion thus focuses on two types of boundary-blocks: *academic* and *economic* capital and the shortfalls of both in shaping the work of PEPs, and which buttress the boundedness of academic and professional service fields.

i. Academic capital

First to emerge from the focus groups was the extent to which participants described themselves as being frequent victims of academic snobbery and prejudice born of academics who refuse to recognise their expertise and status as professionals. Thus, despite a major emphasis on the professionalisation of those in 'administrative' roles in universities (Santiago *et al.* 2006; Sebalj *et al.* 2012), their professionalism continues to be either contested or else ignored by academics. In the focus groups our participants frequently bemoaned being forced to defend and make the case for their contribution. Participants like 'Jen' for instance spoke of having to routinely convince academics of her expertise and of a struggle to claim parity of esteem:

Sometimes I have to sit down with academics and go, I invite you to think about the word professional and professional services, I'm a professional. My knowledge may be different to yours but it's worth the same, and once we can get that going, then we usually can manage to work together. 'Jen'

Some of our participants also equated professional ignorance of PEPs among academics to their awkward placing within institutions and PEPs most often – and mainly due to financial considerations – being found in centralised units, and thus crucially at distance from faculty. Conversely, participants like 'Mollie' spoke of the advantage to PEPs of being co-located with faculty, especially in cultivating mutual understanding, respect and trust, although this appeared a non-typical arrangement:

It's so important being with researchers because I'm not an engineer but I share an office with them. I've learnt so much about their language, what their fears are, what the challenges are, what they are good at, and it's amazing working in a team . . . I can complement their skills and then you get this trust, and I think it is really powerful. 'Mollie'

Accordingly, with physical separation of PEPs and academics the norm in most universities, participants claimed that for the most part academics' views of PEPs were characterised by prejudices concerning what they are not, *academics*, and a highly reductionist and similarly biased vision of what they are held to be, *practitioners*. Consequently, participants like 'Cerys' attributed much of the disdain shown towards PEPs by academics as stemming from a perception that as 'practitioners' they lacked academic credentials with a doctorate representing an entry-level qualification for the vast majority working in academic research contexts. That almost half of our PEP participants are educated to such level and that many in professional service contexts are similarly qualified, seems a point neglected by academics. Notwithstanding, a Ph.D was viewed as an indispensable form of academic capital or professional license providing for more equal and respectful conversations between PEPs and academics and an increased chance that the former might actually be listened or even responded to:

Unfortunately, I think we have academic snobbery in full force and therefore some people only value an opinion or will listen and be influenced by someone that has a Ph.D. And that's happened to me and it's happened to other people who don't have a Ph.D, across the university. 'Cerys'

However, participants also discussed that while having a doctorate might provide *access* to the academic community it would far from guarantee an enhanced capacity to *advocate* within the academic community; much as post-doctoral or early career researchers constitute a marginalised and precarious, and thus 'hushed' higher education constituency (*cf.* Archer 2008; McAlpine 2010), so too PEPs. Instead, an opportunity for cultural and/or organisational leadership within universities as highly stratified organisations was seen as inseparably linked to academic seniority and - as 'Alison' surmised - as being limited to the professoriate:

I can tell people to do things until I'm blue in the face, but if a professor comes along and says, "Oh, I did it this way, I found that . . .", that's immensely more valuable than me telling them something. 'Alison'

Being without a doctorate was also seen by our participants to be massively disadvantageous in terms of their career progression and chances for promotion – although perversely, as 'Claire' suggested, external non-disclosure of academic credentials was felt to actually benefit interactions with public communities:

On the ground when I'm actually dealing with members of the public I never use 'doctor' because it is much better, for me, and my relationships and the people I'm working with to not use that. 'Claire'

Notwithstanding, some of our participants like 'Miriam', forcefully articulated how the valorisation of the Ph.D simultaneously devalues other forms of symbolic capital found in universities – even those closely related – and consequently also the injustice visited upon those with commensurate yet unequally rewarded forms of expertise:

I have a colleague with masses of experience who didn't have a Ph.D, and it was seen as really problematic to promote her on an equivalent [academic] level. It is just ridiculous that somebody with years of experience doing this and writing papers and being published, but because she didn't have a Ph.D, shouldn't be promoted. It is just sickening. 'Miriam'

'Justine' was another participant who as a PEP with a doctorate spoke of the career arrest suffered by those without, and signposted the inflexibility and failure by universities, despite a proliferation of non-academic roles and consequent demand for different forms of expertise and necessary experience, to broaden the parameters by which jobs – and thereby also, professionalism – are rationalised and in moving beyond criteria relevant only to academics:

I know somebody who is doing a very similar role to my job and she's on the lower band to me and she can't be moved up at the moment because she hasn't got a Ph.D. 'Justine'

The misalignment of PEPs within existing institutional career structures and a systemic failure on the part of universities to explicitly rationalise PEP roles in terms of non-academic yet equivalent forms of expertise, was thus felt by participants to further exacerbate their estrangement from academics, their institutional dislocation and status as fringe players; a situation some commented was compounded by a dearth of powerful representation at senior institutional levels. Instead, participants like 'Leah' argued that the lack of a clear career structure for PEPs within professional service divisions - and by implication, unequal remuneration and a career ceiling - corresponded to a broken pipeline to university senior management and institutional isolation.

I do wonder whether if we had a clearer professional service structure for public engagement, in terms of senior management, whether that would help to combat this

snobbery. It is because we don't have anyone to look up to a professional service level.
'Leah'

This dearth of representation at the most senior institutional levels forms then a perfect circle of inequality and exclusion or *Matthew* effect, where a dearth of advocacy among the most powerful members of an institutional community, or rather the invisibility of PEPs among these, culminates in the perpetuation of public engagement as low-status and low-priority. Moreover, where PEPs are blocked from more senior roles or participation in senior management, their power to hold an institutional agenda for public engagement is as 'Kathleen' states, neutralised where they are denied or else censured for presuming the authority and autonomy necessary for effective institutional leadership:

I am not part of senior management group meetings. I don't get to influence. I don't have the agency that I would have if I was a more senior level. So, for example, I tried to use my own initiative and come up with an idea with a colleague of mine and I got absolutely cut off. I was told I had stepped out of line; I had done things I should not have done, and my line manager was told to read me the riot act. And that was an actual phrase. And so, there's this . . . They look to me to lead. They say that I lead on this for the university but then they don't have anything that enables me to do that job properly. 'Kathleen'

ii. Economic capital

Our second boundary-block identified from the focus groups was that of economic capital, which reveals that in many of our sampled institutions a financial commitment to public engagement has receded. Where external funds for public engagement had expired it was found that these had not been replaced with direct institutional funding for public engagement personnel, in consequence of which, dedicated teams had contracted. In most cases, it was considered that a professional footprint for public engagement within institutions had decreased, even - in some centralised units - to the point of erasure. The vast majority of our participants thus represented a professional community that saw itself under threat, primarily from an existing trend of budget cuts to human resources in universities, and relatedly, as we would infer, because of the difficulty of rationalising their offering as any kind of economic contribution. While focus group participants like 'Julie' spoke of professional resource for public engagement being halved - and intimated what we know to be a trend of PEPs in universities being on fractional contracts - others like 'Karen' described the total hollowing out of PEPs and contradiction between a stated vision for public engagement and its actual investment:

Well we were a team of 5 and are now a team of 2.7. The others weren't replaced so it's a problem for us. 'Julie'

I feel like there's a huge vacuum. The university has an intentionally rehearsed supportive statement around what engagement is. But if you look at the central engagement team, recently it's gone. 'Karen'

Others like 'Debbie' suggested that where professional services were being downsized, academics would be forced to absorb these roles, despite having neither the necessary knowledge nor experience, and in the context of already stretched workloads (we would venture to suggest) capacity and/or motivation:

There's this ridiculous idea, that academics can do professional services roles. So all the support that is absolutely essential for academics to function, it's been pulled out.
'Debbie'

The intimation is thus that where PEPs are cut from universities, time allocated for the undertaking of public engagement will further diminish and cause public engagement to be undertaken outside of contracted hours, even more so than it currently is – placing further unreasonable burden on staff and potentially further jeopardising their welfare. By extension, the quality of public engagement might also diminish, where those without necessary expertise are forced into positions of leadership. This was a point picked up by 'Mel', who spoke of a clumsy redistribution of leadership for public engagement in universities – or potentially of its being absorbed into other leadership portfolios – and its (mis)assignment to individuals in positions of authority yet without any track-record of, and as may be inferred, interest in public engagement. Such a given scenario would seem only to undermine the credibility of public engagement leadership in universities and by extension signposts how little significance is attached to its cultural embedding:

People have been put in those positions of power, without necessarily expertise or background of public engagement that they could have a deep and meaningful conversation about it. 'Mel'

This kind of power displacement (or misplacement) is also explained by PEPs as individuals enduring continuous occupational uncertainty associated with limited, fixed-term project-based funding and was reflected by participants, like 'Sam', as producing a state of 'limbo' and confinement to the present. Yet these are states that seem antagonistic to a long-term institutional vision or strategy for public engagement and commitment to cultivating long-term external (and internal) relationships, as reflected by 'Anna'.

I'm definitely a limbo person. So, I don't really know what I'm doing next, but I'm enjoying what I'm doing, I'm living in the moment. 'Sam'

I think there's a mismatch between the short-term nature of some of our contracts, and the time that we need to build relationships . . . I think all of us would like a bit more stability. But stability for the role and stability for people outside the university to know that there's a way in, to have a point of contact to come into the university and for the university to be inviting to come into. 'Anna'

While, these reflections are relatively benign and reflect a mood of tolerance – or perhaps resignation – towards the occupational hazards and contradictions of professional public engagement in universities, they also signal the difficulty faced by PEPs in building, and more so sustaining, a university-based engagement career. A further point to be made, though not here articulated, is that the majority of PEP roles are financed through academics' project

funding. Consequently, PEPs may suffer a burden of debt to academics or may be made to feel indebted, especially where academics might prefer their hard-fought funds to be spent in other ways or on other things. Crucially, however, without the success of academics in the acquisition of grant income, PEPs, beyond a few centrally funded by their universities, might not exist. By extension, the dispersion of PEPs across universities appears directly contingent upon academics' efforts in recognising and centralising the significance of public engagement within their research (proposals) – which is why many PEPs will likely fear the removal of pathways to impact statements as the primary means by which public engagement activity is formally articulated in (response-mode) research funding in the UK (see also Fransman 2020; Wilsdon 2020; Watermeyer 2020). In an ironic twist, therefore, the survival of PEPs within universities and correspondingly formal leadership for public engagement in universities, lies in the hands of academics, often as it seems as engagement agnostics or for whom public engagement remains an indulgence in the milieu of an accelerated academy and moreover as a constituency resentful of the bureaucratisation of the university (Furedi 2002) and their more recent outnumbering in many institutional settings by non-academics. Furthermore, it would seem that universities' and academics' capacity for seeing through an obligation to the public good is inextricably related to their entrepreneurial capacity and competitiveness within the 'research game'. The economic dependence of PEPs on academics may thus not only explain the subordination of PEPs in terms of their weaker academic capital but the nature of public engagement in universities as a gig economy and the transient and unstable nature of public engagement employment. Furthermore, we are shown through these accounts how the formalisation of public engagement in universities and the future sustainability of PEPs is connected to a principle of competitive accountability and academics' complicity and aptitude as market capitalists.

Discussion

Where once those in the non-academic arm of universities were clearly distinguished for their membership of and containment within an 'academic civil service' (Sloman 1964) or 'administration' (Shattock 1970), their contemporary equivalents are 'multi-professionals' (Whitchurch 2007) who, in an era of universities as highly complex organisations whose success depends on the confluence of different forms of expertise, are challenged to work 'polycontextually' (Engestrom 1995) and across a variety of institutional jurisdictions and cultures. However, a requirement for non-academic multi-professionals: professional service staff, to boundary-cross is met with resistance and in many cases, hostility where the university has become not only more complex but more stratified and home to what are often impregnable managerialist hierarchies and gated communities; typically erected and sustained by a white, male professoriate or else cadre of senior institutional managers of a similar demographic. A concentration of power away from both an academic rank and file and the vast majority of professional service staff means that despite an organisational mandate within universities for distributed leadership, leadership of any substantive kind, exercised by anyone other than senior institutional managers or senior professors is largely superficial and/or symbolic. Thus, we find in many universities that academics (and many of those in professional service divisions) feel disempowered, disenfranchised and alienated from the governance and running of their institutions, and harbour suspicion and mistrust of those with institutional capital and power – or those who would present as having such – who are accused of suppressing or else denying their critical freedoms and agency. Recent criticism in the UK of what is felt to be the disproportionately high pay of senior university managers

has further amplified a sense of division and injustice suffered by a university proletariat and has concentrated an already 'highly resilient anti-management culture' (Archer 2005) among academics, resulting in unprecedented and sustained industrial action. Much of academics' antipathy to what they perceive to be the deleterious effects of higher education's neoliberalization, is thus focused on universities' 'zombie leadership' and their transmogrification into 'toxic' institutions (Smyth 2017).

This rupture in relations between academics and senior university leaders may be especially problematic for professional service staff, where there is a risk of them being viewed by academics as 'minions of management' (Allen-Collinson 2009) and/or 'docile clerks' (Scott 1995) obediently implementing and imposing management's orders on academics. For the majority of professional service staff working at the centre of universities, and supposedly at management's hip, their physical dislocation and therefore also cultural removal from faculty exacerbates a sense of "them and us" (Dobson 2000), a binary divide (Kuo 2009), perhaps even impostor phenomenon (Clance and Imes 1978) and an escalated risk of micro-aggressions and/or micro-insults (Sue *et al.* 2007) from resentful and distrustful academics. This divide is not helped by historical prejudice from academics towards those in *administrative roles* (Halsey 1992 etc.) and compounded by limited understanding of their role and contribution (Allen-Collinson 2007; Szekeres 2004); their low institutional capital – particularly as reflected in their remuneration and terms of employment (Wohlmuther 2008); and limited appreciation among academics of both their knowledge and responsibility (Whitchurch 2007), which is aggravated by their physical separation within universities. As neither academics nor managers, they are what Leach (1976) described as 'threshold people' operating with 'liminal status' and form therefore, as Marginson and Considine (2000) have pointed out, an under-represented voice.

While demands are rehearsed for academics and professional service staff to achieve a better 'relational quality' (Gibbs and Kharouf 2020) and more in the way of reciprocal 'goodwill' (Gibbs 2019) in response to the constellation of demands increasingly exerted upon their universities (Basnett 2005), and despite appeals for the re-energising of the university in terms of its commitment to a civic mission and the generation of public goods (Goddard *et al.* 2016), the professional era of public engagement has largely failed to correct cultural bias or mobilized in any substantive and sustainable way, an attitudinal shift towards its undertaking or leadership within universities. While research credentials, specifically doctorates, among PEPs are seen to soften perceived socio-cultural differences and facilitate their boundary crossing into academic territories, the front-staging of their academic-identities is felt to simultaneously weaken their capacity for 'boundary spanning' (*cf.* Weerts and Sandmann 2010) into external public communities. Moreover, by foregrounding their research credentials and commonality with academics, PEPs are at risk of further casting their expertise of public engagement into the shadows, thereby contributing to role dilution and dissonance, and the potential for stratification within their own professional community – though equally we recognise how this symbolic capital may be weaponised in pushing through their demands.

Public engagement as a *formal* and *institutionalised* activity and its professional leadership appears thus in a state of arrest, potentially even decline, where it is in most part led by a seemingly diminishing band of multi-professionals (Whitchurch 2007) whose expertise tends

to be unrecognised by their academic colleagues and senior institutional managers. They appear to lack the structure and agency and, analogously, the academic and economic capital necessary for meaningful and *affective* institutional leadership, which might also provide resistance to what Watermeyer and Olssen (2019) have called the ‘dissipating value of public service in UK higher education’. Moreover, as Macfarlane (2010) has noted, while many professional service staff have been upskilled into ‘para-academic roles’, the positional ambivalence and confused capital of PEPs in universities causes their deskilling and deprofessionalisation where atomised into numerous explicitly ‘administrative’ and/or delivery roles.

In our focus groups this was observed in the way public engagement is formalised across a large number of different, discrete and sometimes disconnected non-academic functions, which in turn reflects a multitude of engagement applications, *habitus* and audiences: community or civic, corporate, policy *etc.* and a continuing sense of ambivalence in apropos of exactly what public engagement means in university contexts, especially from the perspective of those less experienced. Where the contribution of PEPs – as articulated by our focus group participants – continues to suffer from a dearth of high-level institutional advocacy, public engagement will in all likelihood continue to be neglected and unrepresented in institutional structures and funding allocation, and will therefore continue to wane, perhaps to the point of its dereliction in universities. Concurrently, the symbolic violence committed upon PEPs and the denigration and denial of their expertise and status as professionals will also persist, where their precarity accentuates and agency further slips.

While a significant emphasis has been placed on changing an academic mindset around public engagement in universities, with academics the focus of such culture change work, far less attention has been given to how institutional structures might be reformed so as to better accommodate leadership for public engagement when in both strategic and delivery terms it is typically provided by either non-academic or else quasi-academic public engagement professionals. A failure on the part of institutions to engage with structural reforms related to PEPs as a particular cadre of professional service staff, is argued herein to form perhaps the greatest barrier to the formal embedding of public engagement within universities. It also intimates the kinds of boundary-blocks potentially faced by other professional service staff as multi-professionals in a prestige economy. A persistent focusing on culture change among academics in the milieu of public engagement’s ‘institutionalisation’ (*cf.* Watermeyer and Lewis 2018) is thus misplaced. Instead, the most effective investment to be made in the advance and amelioration of research-intensive institutions as publicly engaged, comes from a reconsideration of the role of PEPs and the collapsing of existing hierarchical structures that cause their ‘field-containment’ and concurrently inhibit and impede their contribution.

We thus surmise, that a policy focus and investment in external drivers intended to change academic attitudes and behaviours have and continue to be for the most part profligate, where public engagement by academics, despite over ten years of culture-change initiatives, tends to be undertaken by significant numbers of academics albeit those who are already invested, intrinsically motivated and uninfluenced by forms of incentivization. We recommend, therefore, that a policy focus needs reorienting to the non-academic architecture of public engagement within HEIs, and that not *culture* change but *organisational* change is necessary for the materialisation of the university as a public institution. Moreover,

we would advocate that organisational change in universities must be committed to not exclusively by academic members of the university community – whose capacity to challenge the status quo is typically strengthened by the extensiveness of their unionisation – but include the professional service community. The mobilisation of professional services as a *critical* community is, however, no easy task, given that their identity – unlike academics – is tightly bound with that of their institutions; where their roles are so diverse and disparate as to make them at best an inchoate collective; where they lack the same (however challenged and eroded) privileges of freedom and autonomy afforded to academics; and where also their union participation and thus ability to collectively-organise is, we would speculate, far less than their academic counterparts. Nevertheless, professional service staff are compelled to overturn their disadvantage as a majority-minority and overcome the boundary-blocks of academic and economic capital in order to participate at the high table of institutional affairs and accordingly in organising for a more equal, integrated and cohesive university community where various forms of expertise and professionalism are not only acknowledged but valued and respected. For PEPs specifically as one cadre of professional service staff, often with research credentials, their status as quasi-academics affords albeit limited additional capital and potential leverage in advancing the case for and legitimizing non-academic practices in universities.

Notwithstanding, in the milieu of higher education as a prestige economy and the seemingly unflinching grip of competitive accountability, the value attached to the core academic commodities of research and teaching, mean that a rationalisation for investing in non-core academic commodities (the positional gain from which remains tenuous and in many ways unproven) and their purveyors will prove an even harder sell. The mobilisation and acquisition of any such academic capital by PEPs will in such context be further precluded by their abandonment within the university's third space. Without clear evidence of a tangible hard return on investment, public engagement as a *formal* strategic priority will likely continue to flounder and the vast majority of its activity will remain invisible, much like those appointed to provide its institutional leadership; ghosts in the machine.

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