Explaining changes in higher education administrative work, influence, and authority: an examination of assessment administration in English higher education

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Abstract

This thesis explores changes in the authority and influence of English higher education administrators over university work. To conduct this exploration, I drew on Andrew Abbott's system of professions, to explain how and why higher education administrators have become more involved in assessment, a core academic area of higher education learning and teaching.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with thirteen senior and middle administration managers working in different parts of the English higher education sector. These managers provided detailed descriptions of assessment administration within their own higher education institution (HEI) and expert commentary on the changing nature of assessment administration. I analysed the interviews using a framework derived from Abbott to understand how administrators contribute to assessment decisions. I draw on Abbott's theory to find explanations for the themes and variations that I observed.

I found assessment administration operating in an environment that has become increasingly complex because of both external forces, and forces from within individual HEI. Administrators were mobilising diverse and new forms of knowledge to contribute to assessment decisions in ways that were influential yet with a clear perception of the boundary of academic and administrative authority. Assessment administration is varied and was not developing uniformly. I argue that this is because there are differences in the core tasks of assessment administration, the impact of forces, how knowledge is being reshaped, the visibility of administrative work and the engagement of academics. I claim that individual higher education institutions have significant power to shape how administrative work, authority and influence evolve within their own institution.

These findings contribute to the emerging field of higher education administration research, providing a new explanation of how and why administrative work, authority and influence may change. They also provide new insight into assessment administration, a specific area of academic administration. The findings have implications for how HEIs manage the division of labour and manage change, and implications for how we research the changing nature of higher education work.

Chapter 1
Setting the scene

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that higher education operates within an increasingly complex external environment (Martin, 1999; Barnett, 2000; Guri-Rosenblit, Šebková, and Teichler, 2007; Austin, 2012). Within this context, massification, marketisation, external regulation and technology have put pressure on academic work (Henkel, 2010), resulting in claims that academic work has been fragmented, specialised, and redistributed to other workers (McInnis, 2000; Musselin, 2007; Macfarlane, 2011). We currently lack equivalent empirical knowledge about how the increasingly complex context is impacting administrative workers, despite their representing a large part of the higher education workforce. There is an emerging literature which claims that non-academic managers make significant contributions to their higher education institutions (HEI), discussed in Chapter 2. Concurrently, there is a persistent narrative that academic autonomy is under threat, yet no analyses of how administrative influence over academic matters is changing. Through this thesis, I argue that without a better understanding of administrative work, including how it is evolving and whether and how it poses a threat to academic authority, we risk perpetuating existing organisational blind-spots (Rhoades, 1998) which could prevent HEIs reaching their full potential.

In this introductory chapter I set the scene for my research, beginning with my motivation for researching academic administration within English higher education, including my own positionality. I then explain my rationale for refining the research focus to assessment administration, as an illustration of my wider interest in academic administration. I explain how I came to adopt Andrew Abbott's theory about how control of work changes before setting out the overarching research question that this thesis addresses. I conclude by setting out the structure of the thesis.

Professional motivation for this study

My motivation for this research project emerged from my professional experience as an academic administration manager in the English higher education sector and has been driven by a desire for practical knowledge to help HEIs improve their operations and to make sense

of my own experiences as a higher education manager. My interests have been shaped by my engagement with existing research literature as part of my professional doctorate. In this section I explain the evolution of my research interest.

When I started a professional doctorate in 2013, I had been working in higher education for six years. I had worked at three different HEIs and was actively engaged in understanding sector practice and professional development through the Association of University Administrators (AUA). I had completed a Master's in International Higher Education where I had explored scholarly debates about the student learning experience, approaches to assessment and the historical development of universities in the UK. My Masters culminated in a dissertation on the experiences of joint honours students, an under-researched group of learners, and I expected to continue this research when I commenced the doctorate. However, one of the benefits of the professional doctorate is that it allows a wider exploration of the field in the early stages, and as I explored the higher education field, my research focus shifted towards higher education administrative work – which I will refer to as HEAW.

I began exploring HEAW through writing a methodological proposal to research the career progression of academic registrars - a senior post that typically women have been well-represented in - as part of an assignment related to the under-representation of women in higher education leadership. Writing this proposal introduced me to literature examining academic and professional careers in higher education, particularly academic managers (Deem, 2004), and the professional identity of non-academic managers (Whitchurch, 2004; 2007; 2008a). This literature sparked my interest, and I continued exploring non-academic workers in subsequent assignments by reviewing the literature to understand perceptions and career development of administrators within the UK, Australia, and United States. At this point I realised there was a substantial gap in the research literature. Broadly, HEAW is under-researched and an emerging area of study. Within this emerging field, the work that I do in academic administration, that supports learning, teaching, assessment, and students, was not visible.

My research aims changed and I felt compelled to shine a light on the contributions of those working in academic administration, giving their work a place in the small, but growing field of research. My aims evolved further as I reflected on my own practice and continued exploring the literature. I realised that the lack of detailed and empirical understanding about what administrators do in higher education is more problematic than simply undervaluing or

not recognising part of the workforce; it means we do not know how we can best organise ourselves. As I mentioned above, this argument has been made by Gary Rhoades (1998), professor of higher education in the United States, who has called for more research and thick descriptions of the nature of administrative work in today's complex settings. Similarly, Teichler (2003) suggested that future-conscious higher education research should try to address gaps in understanding how administrative roles evolve, recognising their growth could have "far-reaching implications" for higher education (p.171). I wanted to understand how academic administration within English HEIs was evolving so that we can make better decisions about how we work; I hoped that greater understanding would have practical implications for higher education leaders and managers to help us respond to the increasingly complex higher education environment in a proactive way, to better manage resources, the division of labour and delivery of change.

Refining my research focus

Having established that my research would focus on academic administration, I began thinking about a research project. As an under-researched area, I found this challenging as there were many possibilities. I considered myself an experienced academic administration manager, having already acquired a breadth of experience working in five different English HEIs that spanned mission groups[1], having taken on increasing management and leadership responsibilities, broader functional remits, and crossed different organisational boundaries. My roles have ranged from the most junior administrative member of an academic department, to one of the most senior members of an institutional administrative team reporting directly to the Academic Registrar. Given the breadth of my own experience, I reflected on my career to help shape this research, and then sought to validate my observations through practitioner sources such as conference workshops, practitioner journals, mailing lists and sector organisations and seek explanations from the existing academic literature.

I made several key observations. First, academic administration as a professional area of work in England was not well-defined; the broad area it covers is recognised through the suite of specialist groups established by the Academic Registrar's Council[2], which includes

[1] Some UK HEI have formed allegiances based on broadly similar origins, values and strategy. I have worked in two Russell Group, two MillionPlus, and one former 1994 Group.
[2] The national forum for senior managers responsible for the academic administration of student matters in publicly funded UK HEI.

admissions, assessment, quality assurance, student records, student casework, timetabling, postgraduate, subjects allied to medicine and UK visa and immigration (ARC, 2022). Second, there was no standard way of delivering academic administration, either in organisational structures or core processes. This observation was supported by a survey of the remits of academic registrars, which noted considerable diversity, and an expansion of traditional remits to include student services and planning functions (ARC, 2008). Third, there were different expectations of administrators in similar roles at each HEI. Emerging studies exploring specific administrative roles suggested differences could be the result of an HEI's historical status, distinguishing between older and newer institutions (McMaster, 2005; Shelley, 2010). I also recognised in practice, differences in organisational culture and academic disciplines that chimed with prominent writing about differences in academic work (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Trowler, 2008). Additionally, I made observations that reinforced our lack of documented knowledge about the nature of academic administration, or explanations for its form: I noted a change in my core academic and administrative peers as I changed roles and HEI; on multiple occasions I acquired unexpected responsibilities and authority; and many HEIs were grappling with similar issues, but with different approaches, priorities, and timelines.

Academic administration as a research focus, given its breadth and diversity, would be challenging, particularly within the scope of a professional doctorate. To refine my focus, I looked for commonalities in my experience through my career, and from this I came to focus on assessment administration. As I moved around the sector and progressed through roles within academic administration, connection to the assessment process was a constant element, although my work and expertise associated with assessment changed. For example, my responsibilities in exam board work evolved, beginning as a secretary recording the decisions, which developed to providing training and advice on decisions and constitution, and then to shaping new models of operating across an HEI. It has continued to evolve, and I now serve as an external examiner for progression and award exam boards at another English HEI.

Reflecting on administrative work supporting assessment, I noted abundant points of comparison between my workplaces. At the time of starting this research project in 2016, my ten-year experience in assessment administration had coincided with the growth of electronic assignment submission through Turnitin, and different evolutions of submission practices,

plagiarism policies and associated administrative work. Similarly, I noted different evolving approaches to supporting students with extenuating circumstances, and to reviewing and changing assessment regulations.

Assessment also represented a potentially rich site of emotive experiences for administrators in carrying out their work. Assessment was a point of high stress for students, and I had witnessed administrative colleagues going above and beyond to comfort, console and support students who became distraught at missing the submission deadline or receiving disappointing assignment marks when they collected their work. It was also a point of potential tension between colleagues, between central and departmental administrative teams, and between academics and administrators. This tension ranged from day-to-day frustrations with a lack of communication between administrative teams, academic disdain for administrators who were perceived to have over-stepped, and lively debate about the principles of assessment policies and administrative processes.

Assessment administration emerged as the focus for this research, as a definable area of academic administration, that offered an opportunity to explore changes in administrative work, influence, and authority, and to seek explanation for the diversity of practice that I experienced, and the evolving boundaries of administrative work.

Adopting a conceptual and theoretical framework

Given the dearth of literature on HEAW (discussed in Chapter 2), I read broadly to develop a conceptual framing. I expanded my reading into academic manager and school settings, noting that the concept of 'roles' and how they change within organisations could be helpful. However, it was the expansion of my reading into the medical field that had the most profound impact on my conceptual framing. As both universities and hospitals are large 'public sector' organisations, with a recognisable professional workforce, I had anticipated there might be useful research about hospital administrators which I could draw on.

In fact, I found connection with literature on the dynamics between doctors and nurses; the 'doctor-nurse game' (Stein, 1967) and the boundaries of medical decision-making where the concept of jurisdiction was used (Svensson, 1996; Allen, 1997). I saw similarities in the way doctors had become reliant on the expertise of nurses to make some patient decisions, with my own professional experience of how my academic colleagues utilised my knowledge and

expertise in assessment regulations to make decisions at exam boards or academic appeals. Exploring the concept of jurisdiction further drew me towards Abbott's work.

In his seminal work, 'the system of professions' Andrew Abbott (1988) builds a general theory about how and why professions evolve. His approach is historical and sociological and is concerned with understanding changes in the central work of a profession. Abbott claims that 'jurisdictional shifts', defined as changes in how the work and the knowledge required to carry out that work is held and controlled, show how groups achieve and maintain power or control over work. While Abbott's theory is about the evolution of formal professions, he acknowledges the theory and concepts could be used to explore divisions of labour between occupations, and Tolbert (1990) suggested its potential for understanding the dynamics of occupational change. Once I discovered Abbott, his framework steered the research project, and as I describe in Chapter 3, shaped the design of the interview guide and my analytic process. I did not seek to make claims about whether academic administration, or even HEAW, constituted a profession, instead I sought to draw on the mechanisms offered by a system of professions approach to make claims about changes in the division of labour, authority, and the influence of administrators over academic matters.

The system of professions framework helped me conceptualise my own professional experience and analysis of research literature. Abbott's analytic tools, the concepts of diagnosis, inference, and treatment, which I define in Chapter 2 and adopt to analyse assessment decisions, enabled me to make connections with my own contributions to decisions being made in my workplace. In his description of how one group of workers can assimilate professional knowledge, I made connections with my work in quality assurance where I helped to shape the learning outcomes of assessment and modules. Abbott's theory of how forces can change the nature of work and knowledge and lead to the control of an area of work to become vacant for another group to claim control over, helped me conceptually frame the widely recognised changes in the literature, particularly in academic work (discussed in Chapter 2). Furthermore, the system of professions approach inherently positions professions, occupations, or groups of workers as existing within an inter-related system, where changes in the work of one group, will likely have an impact on a connected group. I was drawn to this conceptualisation to understand why academic administration is configured differently across the sector, why my core peers changed in different workplaces,

and why the division of labour between academics and administrators was not always the same.

While Abbott's concepts and theory steered the research project, I was cautious to fully commit to embracing the system of professions theory until the analysis stage, for several reasons. First, as a novice doctoral researcher, I was cautious about adopting a theory that has not been widely used in higher education research, especially as I had not worked with theory before. Second, the theory itself has been criticised for its lack of visual representation, "baroque" style (Furness, 2019, p.355), theoretical density (McKenna, 2006), and at times I grappled with its complex and abstract nature. Third, while the analytic concepts of diagnosis, inference, treatment, and jurisdiction have been used in research, the analytic process was often opaque, and as I describe in Chapter 3, I developed my own analytic process to adopt and apply these concepts to assessment work. Finally, I had concerns about the complexity of the analytic process I envisaged to utilise the theory for HEAW. On this point, Abbott's own writing on the evolution of jurisdictions of doctors, lawyers, and librarians (Abbott, 1988; 1998) draws on detailed documentation of the work of these groups over time, which does not exist for academic administration. I had reservations about needing to first build a foundational understanding of the nature of academic administrative work to be able make claims about how and why it was changing. Given my cautiousness in adopting the system of professions approach, my research design retained the ability for using other lenses to understand the nature of administrative work supporting assessment, by surfacing a rich description of the nature of administrative work and administrative roles.

Nevertheless, as I progressed through the research project, Abbott's work became central, and I re-framed the research questions to reflect Abbott's approach (as set out in Chapter 2). It became clear that Abbott's framework was going to be the most helpful in analysing the wide-ranging data that the interviews surfaced as it was Abbott's concepts that offered me the tools to move beyond an analytical description of what assessment administration looks like, towards a deeper understanding of how and why assessment administration was taking its current form. It also provided a language to talk about the boundary between academic and administrative authority and what I define through this thesis as administrative influence.

The research questions in Chapter 2 and 3 reflect the final evolution of research questions during the research process, shaped by Abbott's theory.

The research questions

This research aimed to elicit thick description of the experience of doing administrative work supporting assessment within English HEIs, through qualitative interviews with academic administration managers involved in assessment, to:

- understand how and why assessment administration within English HEIs is changing
- understand how and why administrators influence academic matters
- draw on theory to explain changes in higher education administrative work

This thesis seeks to address the following overarching research question:

How does applying a system of professions approach to the examination of assessment administration within English higher education institutions explain the changing nature of higher education administrative work?

To answer this question, I developed a series of sub-questions, which I employ Abbott's concepts to answer.

RQ1: How and why is assessment administration changing?

RQ2: What influence and authority do administrators have over assessment?

RQ3: How can a system of professions approach explain the evolution of assessment administration?

Conclusion: thesis structure

This thesis follows a traditional format, with considerable space given to reporting of the findings which each employ different elements of Abbott's theory.

In Chapter 2, I position this research within the existing literature on higher education administrative work. I introduce the context that higher education administration operates within, and the key contributions to the emerging field of research, before surfacing the key themes about the changing nature of administrative work, and debates about control and influence. Through this chapter I surface three gaps that this research sought to fill; a gap in our knowledge about the changing nature of academic administration, a gap in our understanding of the influence administrators have within their HEI, and a theoretical gap in

the field to offer explanation for changes in HEAW. I conclude by explaining how Abbott's theory provides a framework to fill these gaps and show how I adopted or adapted concepts to evolve the research sub-questions.

In Chapter 3, I describe and justify the research design, including the philosophical underpinnings, my qualitative methodology and my adoption of data generation methods that include semi-structured interviews and role maps. I describe how I developed my analytic process, which involved thematic analysis and adoption of Abbott's concepts to interrogate administrative contributions to assessment decisions. I explain how I draw on the analysis to make claims about administrative influence and authority and to explain changes in assessment administration. The chapter concludes by explaining how the findings are reported.

I report my findings over three empirical chapters, each drawing on different elements of Abbott's framework to offer new insight to how and why assessment administration, influence and authority is changing.

Chapter 4 draws on Abbott's concepts of forces, work tasks and problems to address the first research sub-question: how and why is assessment administration changing? I report the themes of change in the external and HEIs' internal environment that I position as forces that are reshaping work tasks, reshaping knowledge, and creating new problems within HEIs. Collectively, these forces are making contemporary assessment administration more operationally complex, uncertain, and highly regulated. I build on these findings in Chapter 5 to address the second research question: what influence and authority do administrators have over assessment? I draw on my analysis of administrative contributions to assessment decisions to define indicators of influence and authority. I report my findings thematically and discuss their significance in relation to the themes in the literature about the strategic nature of administrative work and the positioning of academic administration managers as bounded professionals. Chapter 6 represents the culmination of applying Abbott's theory and concepts and shows the explanatory power of the approach. It addresses the final research sub-question: how can a system of professions approach explain the evolution of assessment administration? I report my findings by tracing the different evolutions of three areas of assessment administration, drawing on the theory to tell the stories of change in these areas of assessment administration, and to characterise the changes as resulting from a vacant area of control or a contest for power. In each chapter, I highlight how these findings illuminate blind

spots in research and practice about our understanding of higher education administrative work.

In the final chapter I draw together my findings relating to each research question, and the overall research question and highlight the contributions to knowledge. I claim that through applying and adapting Abbott's theory this thesis makes a significant theoretical and methodological contribution to knowledge. It extends existing scholarly knowledge about the nature of academic administration and contributes to debates about academic authority and administrative influence. Finally, it contributes knowledge that has practical implications for HEI management.

Chapter 2

Researching administrative work, authority, and influence

Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature from the global north, from the 1980s to the time of writing, which sheds light on the nature of higher education administrative work (HEAW) and its relevance for understanding and researching academic administration in England. I begin by describing the context that academic administration operates within. I then set out the shape of existing research into HEAW, which is an emerging field, and characterise it as a patchwork of disparate studies, often small-scale or focused on specific parts of the administrative workforce. I discuss the evolution of administrative work as emergent themes from the patchwork of research before discussing the debate in the literature about the loss of academic authority. I summarise the key gaps that this thesis sought to address, before explaining how the work of Andrew Abbott helped research these gaps, setting out my theoretical framework and developed the research sub-questions and shaped the research design.

The changing context of academic administration

In this section I set out the key themes from the higher education literature about the wider context that academic administration operates within.

At the end of the twentieth century, it was widely recognised that the English sector was operating within an increasingly complex environment, arising from external changes or pressures. These included the removal of a binary divide between universities and polytechnic; expansion of student numbers and changes in funding (Scott and Watson, 1994), economic decline; the impact of technology (Middlehurst and Barnett, 1994); and marketisation and quality assurance regimes (Hounsell, 1994; Haslum, 1994). Such pressures were changing higher education delivery, for example, higher education institutions (HEIs) were making changes to their curriculum or their delivery models (Bocock and Watson, 1994; Martin, 1999), changing credit frameworks, restructuring organisational units (Bocock, 1994), and adapting to externally driven deadlines (Stephenson, 1996). For some, there was a concern that the scale of changes was causing universities to move “from crisis to crisis, doing what was expedient rather than working purposefully towards an identified and

articulated coherent design" (Martin, 1999, p. 19). Since the turn of the century, the evolution and uncertainty of a complex environment has persisted: the sector has become more diverse; new types of providers have emerged; the sector has new regulators, most recently the establishment of the Office for Students (OFS) in 2017; and, there have been multiple changes to funding regimes. In wider society, the use of technology has increased, shaping practices within HEI (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2021). The rhetoric of crisis has continued into the twenty-first century referring to the continued accumulation of tensions and contradictions in the external environment (Scott, 2021).

Within the English higher education system, and this complex environment, there is a continued view that higher education is hierarchical and that HEIs are distinctive and diverse organisations. On hierarchy, it remains common for research and practice to make a distinction between 'pre-1992' and 'post-1992' HEIs, referring to a critical historical turning point in the distinction between university and polytechnic that was removed with the introduction of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), or to distinguish between mission groups. On distinctiveness, Temple (2014) has argued that HEIs are a specific – and distinctive – type of organisation that needs to be managed differently to other large organisations. Not only are English HEIs distinctive from other organisations, but there is also a continuing discourse on the diversity of institutional cultures and disciplinary practices (Becher and Trowler, 2001), and more recently other diversifying factors within an HEI such as technologies and managerialist practices (Trowler, 2014). There is a suggestion that such disciplinary diversity has infused curriculum design (Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2001), learning and teaching regimes (Trowler, 2008) and even assessment microcultures (Simper, Martensson, Berry and Maynard, 2021).

There are indications that HEAW has also been shaped by hierarchy and diversity, for example, research manager responsibilities appeared different at 'pre-1992' compared to newer HEI (Shelley, 2010) and between teaching-focused and research-intensive HEI (Hockey and Collinson, 2009). However, much more research is required to understand how administrative work is structured.

My starting point is that the higher education context within which academic administration operates is complex, uncertain, marketised and highly regulated. In the next section I explore what the literature reveals about how this context is changing administrative work. The diversity of the English higher education sector has influenced my research design, described

in Chapter 3, and my decision to explore changes in assessment administration within multiple HEIs in the English sector. While this research focusses on assessment administration, I have not included a review of the literature on the educational and pedagogic aspects of assessment. This is because my research approach, which I discuss in Chapter 3, is concerned with understanding changes in administrative work, as viewed from the perspective of administration managers.

An emerging patchwork of higher education administration research

An extensive body of work explores how academic work and practices are changing, however, the changing nature of administrative work in higher education is less understood. Research into HEAW is very much an emerging field, reflected in its absence as a major theme in prominent analyses of higher education research (Tight, 2004; Tight, 2018). Its status as an emerging field means that the ground covered by the existing studies is somewhat 'patchy', and while existing research makes a foundational contribution to understanding higher education administration, these patches of research together still leave considerable gaps in knowledge about this sizeable group of the contemporary higher education workforce. Furthermore, the field currently lacks engagement with theory to offer explanations for why themes in the changing nature of work are emerging. Through this section, I briefly trace the evolution of research into HEAW from the 1980s in the global North, signalling critical points in the field's development, and discuss the implications of the HEAW field for researching academic administration.

Literature on HEAW is a relatively recent development, with contributions emerging in the 1980s and 1990s that were primarily qualitative practitioner reflections on administration and management or case studies (Lockwood and Davies, 1985; Cuthbert, 1996; Warner and Palfreyman, 1996). At the turn of the century, the practitioner reflections and case studies have evolved into more rigorous empirical research. In Australia, such studies sought to increase the visibility of the administrative workforce, discussing tensions between academic and administrative workers (Conway, 2000; Dobson, 2000; Conway and Dobson, 2004; Szekeres, 2004; 2006). In the US, studies began to explore human-resources matters, such as staff morale and satisfaction (Johnsrud and Rosser, 1999; Rosser, 2003, 2004; Jo, 2008). In the UK, studies focused on highlighting career trajectories to influence leadership development practices (Whitchurch, 2008b; Lauwerys, 2009; Shine, 2010). There was also an emerging cluster of studies revealing the knowledge, experience, and responsibilities of

administrative research managers (Allen-Collinson, 2006, 2007; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009; Shelley, 2010).

A key step-change in the development of the field arose from the doctoral thesis of Celia Whitchurch (2008a), one of the most influential studies into UK higher education administrative work, because of its scale and its focus purely on administration managers. Whitchurch (2008a; 2008c) proposed a typology of professional identities, bounded, cross-boundary and unbounded, and suggested that the existence of these three different types of professionals signalled an evolution in administrative work. This typology was built around characteristics of administration manager's spaces, knowledges, relationships, and legitimacies. I return to this typology later in this chapter, discussing the positioning of academic administration managers in the research findings. Whitchurch (2009) expanded her initial study to participants outside the UK, developing her typology further, to claim that there is an emerging 'third space' where unbounded and a new type of blended professional operate. The concept of third space professionals has since been widely used for exploring professional identity in higher education (Lewis, 2014; Veles and Carter, 2016; Caldwell, 2022) and represents a major development in our understanding of the higher education workforce. It has typically been positioned as a positive space to work within, where there is opportunity to collaborate on shared institutional goals; however, it has been suggested that such 'in between' spaces are not only a site for collaboration, but also a site of contested authority (Rhoades, 2010; Kallenberg, 2016). It is this contested authority that I want to explore, between academics and administration managers who are operating in a more traditional administrative space. I return to this contested authority later in the chapter.

Whitchurch's work put the spotlight on the experiences of administration managers in the UK in a new way, justifying the need and value of administrative work as a research interest. Building on Whitchurch, researchers have begun to deepen and broaden our knowledge of HEAW, creating a patchwork of knowledge about how HEAW is changing; I use the analogy a patchwork because the research has often been small-scale, taken different approaches to researching HEAW and focused on different parts of the workforce. This patchwork has developed empirical knowledge about the nature of administrative work, discussed in the next section, and contributed methodological knowledge about how to research HEAW which I now discuss.

The patchwork contributes methodological insight into researching HEAW, described as a trail of interwoven qualitative and quantitative studies (Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2015). The qualitative studies contributing insight into the changing work environment and relationship between workers, and the qualitative studies contributing evidence that the number of non-academic workers has increased (Gornitza and Larsen, 2004; Blümel, 2008; Krucken, Blümel and Bloke, 2013; Hogan, 2014). Mixed methods have also been used for nation-wide research in Germany (Schneijderberg, 2015) which has produced large datasets that could be analysed collectively and drilled down to compare the experiences between roles. For example, using this approach enabled Schneijderberg to claim that the nature of work in the area of "development planning" had different characteristics to the area of "quality assurance" (p.137.).

Qualitative approaches align with my own research ontology and epistemology (discussed in Chapter 3), and the studies that have influenced my research redesign have primarily been those that have enabled rich contextualisation of administrative experiences. Typically, these have taken one of two approaches. The first, employing qualitative methods to explore the work of a specific role, such as research managers activities (Allen-Collinson, 2007, 2009; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009; Shelley, 2010) or senior administrative leaders (ARC, 2008; Llewelyn, 2009; Cross, 2014; AHUA, 2018; Coate, Howson and Yang, 2018). The second taking a case study approach to exploring multiple roles within an HEI, such as those that contribute to learning spaces (Graham, 2012; 2013), the contributions of library workers, research managers and IT workers to research data management (Verbaan and Cox, 2014), the relationships between faculty managers and deans (McMaster, 2005) and the identity of professional services staff in an academic school (Caldwell, 2022). Focusing on a single role has enabled claims about how administrative work in a particular area was evolving, whereas the in-depth case-studies have enabled thick description and contextual understanding with less scope for developing sector-wide understanding.

I found studies which focused on a single role or on an area of work offered me the richest insight into administrative work, allowing me to locate, compare or contrast my own experiences. These studies have stuck with me the most and shaped the research I wanted to produce. They have shaped my research design, where I have opted to interview expert commentators (Patton, 2018) so that I can gain insight from different parts of the English higher education sector that might enable comparison between contexts. I discuss the

participant selection in Chapter 3, and my adoption of role maps as a tool to help gain insight into the manager's context.

To date, research into HEAW has not engaged significantly with theory, with many studies using a grounded theory approach with thematic analysis of data. Where theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been used, these once again reflect the patchwork nature of the field and there has been little consensus on such frameworks, except for utilising the concept of third space professionals. The lack of engagement with theory limits the emerging findings to generating knowledge about what is, rather than why it is. This is a gap in the research field, which I sought to fill by adopting theory and concepts from Andrew Abbott's system of professions approach, which I discuss in more detail at the end of this chapter.

The evolution of administrative work and knowledge

There is broad consensus in the literature patchwork that the nature of administrative work is changing: administrators are making strategic contributions to their HEIs, the work is being reshaped, and administrative knowledge is an important element to changes underway. In this section I explore these themes and their implications for our understanding of academic administration.

The emergence of new administrative work

There is a recognised evolution in administrative work. Initially, administration was regarded as having evolved from clerical work associated with recording activity, to administrative work coordinating and organising activity, or further to management work which can involve some elements of decision-making (Lockwood, 1985). In 1985, Lockwood specifically associated 'academic administration' tasks with the role of clerk (p.328). Whitchurch (2004) traced this evolution into the 21st century, claiming that some administration managers now made strategic contributions to their HEI, moving the nature of their work beyond traditional conceptions of administration and management – particularly where administration managers have characteristics of cross-boundary or unbounded professionals (2008a). This claim, that administrative managers make strategic contributions to their HEI, aligned with other commentators who observed the emergence of 'managerial professionals' (Rhoades, 1998; Rhoades, 2010), 'higher education professionals' (Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2013), and 'new professionals' (Kallenberg, 2016). These evolved roles making strategic contributions have been recognised as engaging in activities that were once the purview of academics. For

example, university-level secretaries were “directing the business of governance” (Llewellyn, 2009, p.37), research managers wrote project bids and managed research projects (Shelley, 2010), administration managers “establish services and actively shape the core functions of research and teaching” (Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2013, p.53), and senior professional leaders are now “making decisions at high levels of the organisation that stray into long-established academic territory” (Coate et al, 2018, p.3).

There is also a recognised emergence of new administrative functions or roles. Initially, the HEAW discourse distinguished between specialist functions and generalist functions, where the former required specific training in a function that was not specific to higher education, such as finance, human resources, marketing. In contrast, generalists had an informal knowledge-base and no specific disciplinary training. HEAW in England is positioned as generalist with an informal knowledge development because, unlike the in the US, there is not a professionally certificated qualification route into higher education administration, and many note knowledge and experience is developed ‘on the job’ (Middlehurst and Kennie, 1995; Schneijderberg, 2015). A third grouping, initially referred to as niche workers, emerged in areas of research management and quality assurance (Whyley and Callendar, 1997; Whitchurch, 2004). More recently, there has been an evolution of more specialist roles, some of which have been claimed as third space roles, including: learning technologists (Fox and Summer, 2014), chief data officers (Browning, 2021), and student services (McCaffery, 2010; Morgan, 2012). Furthermore, there has been a visible shift in practice in the emergence of new specialist networks and associations such as strategic planning (HESPA), lean practices (LeanHE), and business continuity (HEBCoN).

Academic administration has traditionally been positioned as generalist (Lockwood, 1985), a term I have personally struggled to accept as a definition of my own work. While my roles have not required formal training or specific qualifications, my job descriptions have emphasised the need for knowledge and experience in particular areas of administration, to be able to manage complex specialist information and to provide advice and interpretations. Additionally, as I have moved from one HEI to another, my first-hand knowledge and experience of how other HEIs operate has been increasingly important; this led me to reflect on themes in the literature about administrative knowledge.

Defining and mobilising administrative knowledge

There is a lack of shared definition of administrative work or administrative knowledge required for higher education administration. Whitchurch's typology of professional identities is the most detailed consideration of knowledge, distinguishing between types of knowledge mobilised, and sometimes created by different administration managers (2008a). Given this gap, I analysed the existing literature to look for further insight into administrative knowledge, and noted the following forms:

- Process knowledge and knowing how things should work was often implicit, aligning with the more traditional notions of administration and management (Whitchurch, 2008a). Such knowledge was recognised to develop through practical experience (Graham, 2012).
- Information-related knowledge which is likely to be formalised in regulations or other documents (Whitchurch, 2008a; Hockey and Collinson, 2009).
- Knowledge about systems and technology, which, it is claimed, is increasing in importance (Waring and Skoumpopoulou, 2013; Graham, 2013).
- Academic knowledge which could be academic qualifications or disciplinary experience (Whitchurch, 2008b; Hockey and Collinson, 2009;).

Additionally, there was an implicit acknowledgment that administration mangers mobilise tacit and institutional knowledge to make strategic contributions to their HEI. Whitchurch (2008a) predicted administration managers would hold and use such institutional knowledge, and the intersections of different knowledges to claim legitimacy in more strategic work, and more recently claims that:

> "Being a professional in higher education today, therefore, is likely to involve being able to work with multiple agendas, some of which may point in different directions, accommodating the tensions and dissonances that are likely to arise." (Whitchurch, 2018)

Tacit or institutional knowledge was visible in research findings relating to third space professionals in new areas of higher education work such as widening participation, learning support (Whitchurch, 2010), and in the credibility that senior leaders built through mobilising their institutional knowledge to "get things done" and "fix things" (Coate et al, 2018, p.3).

Such institutional knowledge represents a form of intellectual capital that Rhoades (2010) argues could be better harnessed by an HEI to support its strategic development.

Knowledge emerged from my synthesis of existing literature as an important factor in the changing nature of administrative work but has not been the explicit focus of research into HEAW and lacks definition in an administrative context. Later in this chapter I show how the theoretical framework that I have adopted enables exploration of the changing nature of administrative knowledge.

Academic administration managers as bounded professionals

Academic administration managers as a group have rarely been the sole subject of research, although they have been represented in participant samples for HEAW more broadly. In 2008, Whitchurch positioned academic administration managers, in particular senior academic administrators and departmental administrators, as bounded professionals. According to her typology, bounded professionals mobilised knowledge that was process related, information-oriented, technical, regulatory, and they use this knowledge to support institutional memory, compliance and to support the decision-making process. For example, a manager of a student records function may take decisions on how that function operates. Bounded professionals may be involved in decisions to provide advice or take decisions that are within their functional remit or established guidelines. This contrasted with cross-boundary professionals who mobilised knowledge drawn from multiple organisation spaces, multiple functions and used this knowledge to interpret, translate across boundaries, construct a case, contribute to ongoing decisions and building institutional capacity. Cross-boundary professionals may take or contribute to decisions that are institution-wide, such as institutional policy.

Positioning academic administration managers as bounded professionals aligns with the description of registry and secretariat functions as "guardians of the regulations" (Barnett, 2000b, p133). This positioning suggests that academic administration may not have undergone some of the changes that other parts of the higher administrative workforce have, as described earlier in the chapter, and academic administration managers may not be involved in strategic work.

There is a limited research base focused on academic administration in an English context. A small-scale survey into the perceptions of administrators supporting academic units found

that administrators perceived their work was very important to a range of student-focused activities, such as recruitment, retention, pastoral care, student outcomes, and the overall student experience (Thorogood, 2013). A unique ethnographic study relating to the implementation of a new student record system found the new system changed the nature of work and knowledge within their HEI (Waring and Skoumpopoulou, 2013). There is a similar absence of documentation about academic administration in professional literature, which has been attributed to a "widespread assumption…that student management is a simple, easy, clerical activity, that anyone can do" (Gledhill, 1996, p.103). At the time, Gledhill recognised problems with this assumption, noting that student management has become more complex, and more than simply recording data; that data needs to be interpreted and presented as management information to inform decisions and is impacted by new technology. Gledhill acknowledged this complexity extended to assessment administration, noting the logistical challenges of delivering examinations, the pressure to process larger numbers of students through exam boards, policies to manage plagiarism, academic appeals, statutory requirements. This observation was made over twenty years ago yet remains valid. There is no academic administration handbook or framework to guide the work, and practitioner networks and mail lists are awash with requests to share practice on principles and practices in the absence of such knowledge.

Rhoades (2010) suggests that the lack of knowledge about large parts of the workforce represents a blind spot in higher education research and management practice, that fails to recognise changes in work are taking place, and that non-academic workers represent a form of intellectual capital that could be leveraged more to the strategic advantage of the HEI. There is a clear gap in our knowledge of the area of academic administration, and how it is changing, that this research sought to fill. Particularly, to be able to understand how the nature of academic administration was changing, and if so, why, and whether such changes have implications for how academic administration managers have been conceptualised as bounded professionals.

Contested authority?

While there has been broad consensus on the trajectory of the evolution of administrative work, the implications that this has on the division of labour, control and influence of administrators is less clear. In this section I show that changes in the division of labour,

administrative control and influence are contested in the research literature and consider how research into this area has been approached to inform my own research.

Academic work is acknowledged as having diversified, become more specialised and subject to increased control (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999; McInnis, 2000; Deem, 2004; Musselin, 2007; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007; Gappa, 2010; Henkel, 2010). Specifically, academic work has been fragmented and unbundled (Macfarlane, 2011) and redistributed to other workers (Coladrake and Stedman, 1999). The increasing responsibilities put upon academics has led to a sense of academic devaluation coupled with a perceived erosion of academic autonomy (Bocock, 1994). These changes have given rise to a narrative that academics have lost control of their work and lost influence in the running of their institutions. In the US, Ginsberg describes "the all administrative university" which is "controlled by administrators and staffers who make the rules and set more and more of the priorities of academic life" (Ginsberg, 2011, p.1), and where academics have no voice in institutional decisions such as investment, the size of the student body or student support.[3] In England this view has been echoed in critiques of the move from a collegiate to a corporate organisation, which represents "the decline of the professor and the rise of the registrar" (Dopson and McNay, 1996, p. 30)[4]. Furthermore, there is a narrative of an increasing "army of administrators" (Jump, 2015) who deliver "empty administration" which serves no obvious purpose and detracts from core tasks (Spicer, 2017).

The literature has acknowledged that increasing power rests within internal governance structures and executive management. This shift has been associated with a highly managerial and bureaucratic system that has resulted in higher workloads, finance-driven decisions, remote senior management teams, and increased accountability (Middlehurst, 2004; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007). Specifically, Stephenson (1996) analysed the decision-making power of committees and claimed that in addition to a committee's traditional role in taking decisions, its role had evolved, and it now legitimised decisions taken by individual managers through a form of delegation, and sometimes served solely as a form of consultation prior to executive decision-making. It is not clear from the literature how the changing nature of administrative work fits into these debates about changes in

[3] In the US context, 'administrators' typically refers to management posts filled by academics, whereas 'staffers' more closely aligns to the English conception of administrators.
[4] At the time of writing, the 'registrar' role in England was typically filled by someone with an academic rather than administrative background.

academic authority, although there are indications from explorations of workplace relationships that administrative workers are perceived to be part of the reason academics have less control, discussed next.

A perceived loss of academic control and influence can have a negative impact on the workplace. Individually, it can impact the working relationships between academics and administrators (Kehm, 2015), and collectively it can reflect a resistance to change (Rhoades, 1998). The effect on academic and administrative relationships has received more attention as a research topic than the resistance of academics, although the findings produce a mixed picture. Early Australian explorations reported a tension (McInnis, 1998) and a sense of "fear and loathing" between the two groups (Conway and Dobson, 2004, p.123), whereas a more recent English contribution found relationships were generally good, with high respect and recognised value of administrative staff (Thorogood, 2013). These different findings could be explained by the different historical and geographical contexts, but other findings indicate that the relationship needs to be understood with a much more granular distinction between the nature of work the administrator is providing. For example, Gray (2015) found that academics had more positive perceptions of administrators in academic departments than administrators in central units, where there was ambivalence. This may be because central administration managers are likely to have to enforce institutional rules and regulations (Palfreyman and Warner, 1996). Similarly, higher education professionals who primarily supported students were perceived to "unburden" academics while those who were perceived to create additional paperwork were judged as "meddling" in academic issues (Kehm, 2015, p.105). These findings suggest that the boundary between academics and administrators could be experienced differently by administration managers located in different organisational units and depending on how their work was perceived to support academic work.

The notion that academics have 'lost' control has been challenged by Rhoades (2010), who instead, suggests that academics have failed to assert control. Rhoades suggests that academics, collectively, have not staked a claim on new areas of work that have emerged, himself exploring academic influence over the use of instructional technologies. The view that academics have failed to assert control could be used to explain the emerging niche areas of administrative work (highlighted in the previous section), in quality assurance, research management, and strategic planning – these have emerged as new administrative areas, but

arguably they could have evolved as academic domains. Any notion that academics have 'lost' control to administrative workers could also be challenged by historical perspectives on administrative work, where Moodie and Eustace (1974) described senior registrars as powerful figures, who were regarded as the institution's eyes, ears, conscience and memory, yet were not perceived to pose a threat to academic authority (cited in Palfreyman and Warner, 1996). Therefore, more administrative involvement or influence, does not necessarily lead to a loss of academic authority. This claim was made in the German context where, although there have been notable shifts in the workforce and in how HEIs operate, administrative leaders positioned themselves as advisors and leaders to an organisation that has retained control by academics (Krucken et al, 2013). Understanding whether control has been lost or relinquished has not been a focus in examinations of higher education work, yet such an understanding could help to better manage relationships between workers, or to offer alternative divisions of labour.

Two recent studies (Kallenberg, 2016; Carvalho and Videira, 2019) have sought to explore the influence that administrators have, using survey instruments to elicit individual's perceptions of influence. Kallenberg (2016) asked 'administrators', 'academics' and 'third space professionals' in the Netherlands to rank their perceived and desired influence over areas of higher education work, while Carvalho and Videira (2019) analysed responses from teaching staff (academics) and non-teaching staff (administrators) to an online survey about perceived changes to governance, and their perceptions of their own autonomy. Kallenberg's findings are difficult to translate to an English context as it was not clear to me how the groups of workers were defined. Carvalho and Videira's are easier to draw comparisons from, claiming that both academic and administrators felt that decision-making had become more centralised, and both groups of workers perceived academics retained more involvement in decisions than administrators. Interestingly, rather than academics feeling that their work was controlled by administrators, there was a stronger perception that the work of administrators was controlled by academics. These findings raise questions about how work is controlled and suggest that administrators may experience a similar sense of not being able to contribute to decisions made at their HEI as their academic counterparts.

However, these explorations of influence only really begin to scratch the surface in understanding the realities of workplace dynamics. For me, there is a methodological issue in these explorations of influence; these studies asked direct questions to rank a perception of

influence, a concept that I feel is much more complex than can be ranked on a scale. The workplace is as a site where power and influence are often negotiated, and such an approach offers no nuanced understanding of why they perceive their influence in a particular way, or any examples to validate if the perception matches reality. An alternative approach to exploring influence has been used to interrogate the changing division of labour and control of the emerging area of research data management. In this study, Verbaan and Cox (2014) conducted research interviews that explored, in a more open-ended way, the evolving responsibilities of IT, library and research staff, surfacing rich description that could be analysed using Abbott's concept of jurisdiction. Using this approach, Verbaan and Cox were able to make claims about why influence and control was emerging in a particular way, specifically, they claimed that Librarians were seeking to expand their control and influence over the new area of research data management through involvement in new tasks, whereas IT and research individuals incorporated emerging tasks into their existing modes of working. The qualitative approach offered me much greater insight into the nature of work that was being undertaken by these different groups of workers, and explanations for their perceptions of the boundaries of their work.

This section has signalled that there is little existing research that unpacks the dynamics of how labour is divided between academics and administrators, or the influence that administrators have. I have suggested that it is important we understand these dynamics as perceptions of influence and control, and of the value of administrative work can create tensions in the workplace. I have indicated that empirical investigation into the concept of influence in HEAW is still developing techniques and that I have found qualitative approaches to provide greater insight into understand why certain perceptions of influence may exist.

Summary: examining administrative influence

Through this chapter I have demonstrated the themes and gaps in existing knowledge about the nature of administrative work, authority, and influence in higher education. In this section I summarise the gaps that this research sought to fill and explain why I draw on the theoretical and conceptual framing from Andrew Abbott and the system of professions.

- There is a gap in research into academic administration in a UK context – and therefore a gap in understanding assessment administration as an element of academic administration.
- There is a gap in whether changes in administrative work represent increased administrative influence over academic issues.
- There is a theoretical gap in explanations for changes that have been observed in administrative work.

To fill these research gaps, I draw on concepts from the work of Andrew Abbott and his seminal work in the sociology of professions *The system of professions: an essay on the division of expert labor* (1988). I believe the theoretical lens of Abbott's system enables multi-faceted analysis of the changing nature of administrative work in ways that the existing concepts of 'boundedness' (Whitchurch, 2008a), 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2008c) on their own cannot. Aspects of Abbott's work have been used in exploring work tasks and jurisdiction in German research that lead to the conceptualisation of 'higher education professionals' (Klumpp and Teichler, 2006). They have also been used to explore how structural forces were constraining academic autonomy in salary negotiations, restructuring the workforce and the use of instructional technology (Rhoades, 1998), to explore the delegation of tasks within university libraries (Kirkpatrick, 1999), and to explore control of work in the emerging area of research data management (Verbaan and Cox, 2014).

I will introduce and explain the concepts in the next section, and how I adapt them for this research, but first here is a summary of the contribution that Abbott's theory has made to my research.

- I used Abbott's concept of *work task* and *problems* to describe the central work of assessment administration. I identify specific examples of everyday decisions about assessment as work tasks, and specific examples of decisions about assessment change as problems.
- I used Abbott's concept of *forces* to understand how 'work tasks' are being reshaped and how new 'problems' were emerging.
- I used Abbott's concepts of *diagnosis, inference, treatment* as an analytic tool to understand how administrators contribute to decision-making in assessment. I analyse administrative contributions to everyday decisions in assessment to understand how the division of labour between academics and administrators is changing. I analyse

administrative contributions to institutional changes in assessment to understand how administrators are engaged in strategic work in assessment.

- I adapt Abbott's concept of *jurisdiction* to make claims about *administrative influence* and *authority* over assessment.
- I draw collectively on these concepts, and on Abbott's notion of *contests* and *vacancies* to seek explanation for the changing nature of administrative work and divisions of labour found.

I believe that using Abbott's concepts enables analysis that attempts to explore not only what administrative work is, but also why administrators have come to be doing the work they are doing. I describe my analysis process using these concepts in Chapter 3.

Theoretical framework: understanding and explaining changing administrative work and influence

My overarching research question was developed as:

> How does applying a system of professions approach to the examination of assessment administration within English higher education institutions explain the changing nature of higher education administrative work?

Abbott believes that examining how an occupational group is changing can be achieved through understanding, in detail, the work they undertake, the control they have over work, and how the work is changed by social and cultural forces.

> "For some, the relation between professions and their work is simple. There is a map of tasks to be done and an isomorphic map of people doing them. Function is structure. But the reality is more complex; the tasks, the professions and the links between them change continually. We must therefore examine the tasks of the professions, the groups that carry them out, and the changing links that bind one to another." (Abbott, 1988, p.35)

In this section, I explain the concepts I have adopted and adapted from Abbott to develop research sub-questions, to shape my research design, and how I used these concepts to analyse data to understand changes in assessment administration.

Assessment administration workers within a higher education institution

Abbott conceives that all professions exist within an inter-related system:

> "Professions evolve together. Each shapes the others. By understanding where work comes from, who does it, and how they keep it to themselves, we can understand why professions evolve as they do." (Abbott, 1986, p.224)

Abbott acknowledges his approach can apply to understanding "groups with common work" (1988, p.20), not just formally defined professions. As such, I conceptualise an individual HEI as a site where there is an inter-related system of workers, to understand how the work of assessment administrators is changing.

This conceptualisation shaped my decision to understand how assessment administration operates *within* a particular HEI. It shaped my methods of data generation, influencing my decision to hear from administration managers in their own words about their work context, and to include role maps as a data generation tool to gain greater insight into an administration manager's context. I define and discuss these methodological aspects in Chapter 3.

Assessment work tasks and problems

To understand how work is changing, Abbott suggests analysis must focus on understanding how the central tasks are changing: what work tasks exist, who undertakes the tasks, why specific workers undertake the tasks, what factors are shaping the tasks, and what factors are shaping the person doing the task.

Work tasks, according to Abbott, can have objective qualities that remain stable, and subjective qualities, that are more susceptible to change. In assessment, an objective quality may be the need to form a judgement on a student's performance, and there could be many subjective qualities that shape this task: how judgements should be reached (e.g. criteria), what form judgements should take (e.g. marks, grades), what form assessment should take (e.g. examinations, assignments, verbal tasks). If these subjective qualities change, then the impact of a single change or collective changes, could create a disturbance in the division of labour and the control of work.

Complex work tasks, require a more sophisticated engagement with knowledge than routine work tasks, and Abbott defines these as professional problems.

> "A profession's work is made up of problems that require service, problems that can belong to individuals or groups, that can be difficulties to be over-come or opportunities to be improved." (Abbott, 1986, p.190)

As demonstrated through the introductory chapter and literature review, in neither research nor practice, is there a universally acknowledged set of work tasks for English academic administration or assessment administration. Through this research I therefore sought to identify the work tasks that are undertaken by administrators to support assessment, and then to understand how those tasks are changing, and how problems are emerging. To do this, I wanted rich description from administrators about the work they carried out, which reinforced my methodological decision to conduct qualitative interviews.

I used the concept of work tasks and problems to analyse the research data (described in Chapter 3), and used this concept to develop the first research sub-question:

> RQ1a: How is assessment administration changing?

Forces shaping assessment administration

Abbott claims that social and cultural forces exert pressure that can change the nature of work and the responsibilities of workers. He makes three claims I deem pertinent to understanding the changing nature of administrative work within HEIs.

First, he claims external forces such as technology, organised capital, and social movements shape the evolution of formal professions:

> "External forces provide most of the actual, historical events that drive change in professional life." (Abbott, 1988, p.115)

I therefore conceptualise the various elements of the changing context described at the beginning of this chapter as external forces, and this research sought to fill the gap in our knowledge about how these forces are impacting academic administration.

Second, he claims forces within professions can reshape work, which can result in work being organised differently in different contexts:

> "The existence of differentiation means that considerable change can occur in workplace reality" (Abbott, 1988, p.124)

Earlier in this chapter I described changes in academic work, which I conceptualise as forces within the academic profession that could impact the work of administrators, as a connected group of workers to academics. Furthermore, I have shown that there is a trend of specialisation and the emergence of new niche areas of administrative work, which could be considered internal differentiation within the administrative workforce. I wanted to understand whether academic administration has become a more specialised area of administrative work, and whether there are specialisms within it.

Third, Abbott recognises that a worksite, in this case an HEI workplace, can play an important role in defining the work of an occupational group:

> "Divisions of labor often exist between professions as well as within them…workforce organization strongly affects the network of interprofessional connection." (Abbott, 1998, p.128)

I reported earlier in this chapter that HEIs are recognised as distinctive and diverse, and that HEI structure, or historical status, could shape administrative work within it. However, the research base is limited and the explicit institutional factors that shape administrative work have not been explored. I used the concept of forces to answer a further research sub-question:

> RQ1b: Why is assessment administration changing?

Drawing on Abbott's concept of forces, I conceptualise assessment administration as part of a specific area of academic administration, that is itself part of the broader realm of higher education administration. It operates within a specific HEI context, that may be shaped by its historical status and structural elements. This HEI, and therefore the work within it, operate within a complex external environment.

As I wanted to identify factors that were shaping assessment administration, I decided to explore assessment administration within *multiple* HEI, so that I might find themes and comparisons in organisation contexts. Examining multiple HEI shaped the topics covered in the research interviews, particularly, seeking to cover ground that sought administration manager's perspectives on how the work or division of labour had changed, and if so, why.

I used the concept of forces to analyse the research data, and combined it with the concepts of work tasks and problems (described in Chapter 3) to develop and answer the research question:

RQ1: How and why is assessment administration changing?

Assessment administrator's influence and authority

According to Abbott (1988), professions can claim jurisdiction over a task, or an area of work when they have exclusive rights to perform the acts of 'diagnosis', 'inference', 'treatment' to solve 'professional problems' and when they have control over the 'knowledge system' used to perform those acts. Professions could claim 'full' jurisdiction or may arrive at a 'settlement' which can reflect different ways that the control of work is divided. I adopt and adapt these concepts to understand the influence and authority that administrators have over assessment.

In the workplace, jurisdictional claims are "fuzzy" (Abbott, 1998, p.66), temporary, and extremely vulnerable to change. As I am researching the HEIs as workplaces, where my professional experience indicates variation and sometimes a lack of clarity, I chose to adapt the concept of jurisdiction to better reflect concepts used in the HE literature, instead exploring administrative influence and authority. I use the term 'authority' to refer to the ability of academics or administrators to take decisions on assessment, and 'influence' to refer to the contribution administrators make to assessment decisions and assessment change. I developed the second research question:

RQ2: What influence and authority do administrators have over assessment?

To answer this question, I adopt Abbott's concepts of diagnosis, inference and treatment as an analytic tool. These acts reflect different ways that professionals or groups of workers contribute to solving problems:

- *Diagnosis* involves classifying a problem, taking information into the knowledge system, assembling a picture of the issue or the 'client' needs.
- *Inference* involves reasoning about the problem, taking information from the diagnosis and indicating a range of treatment options, with predicted outcomes, and involves abstract judgement to connect diagnosis and treatment.

- *Treatment* involves bring instructions out of the knowledge system and taking a decision about what action to take.

I conceptualise decisions about assessment as problems. These problems may be everyday decisions, or decisions about change. I analyse them to understand how administrators contributed to the acts of diagnosis, inference, and treatment in those decisions, to make claims about administrative authority and influence. For Abbott, how knowledge is used in these acts is critical, and as I describe in Chapter 3, my analysis sought to understand the forms of knowledge administrators mobilised to contribute to these acts.

Focusing on assessment decisions was influenced by Whitchurch (2008a) who positioned decisions as a lens through which to observe differences in professional identities. At the time, she distinguished between three types of administrator involvement in decision-making: providing advice about established regulatory frameworks (type 1), taking decisions within established or local guidelines (type 2), and decisions about institutional policy or outcomes (type 3). Whitchurch claimed that administrators involved with type 2 and type 3 decisions were making significant contributions to their institutions, beyond what has traditionally been expected of administrators. I thought that focusing on decisions would enable me to apply Abbott's concepts and enable the findings to be situated in relation to Whitchurch's definition of bounded-ness so that I could understand whether academic administration managers could still be considered bounded professionals. This analytic focus also builds on a suggestion to analyse higher education professionals' involvement in policy decisions to understand their role as policy actors (Zahir, 2010).

In my data generation, I sought to elicit examples of assessment decisions and to understand the administrator's perception of their contribution to that decision-making process. This focus shaped my participant selection, purposefully seeking insight from administration managers who could comment on a recent institution-wide change to assessment, and to gain insight into different areas of decision-making in assessment work. I expand on the research design in Chapter 3.

Explaining changes: stories of disturbances, contests, and vacancies

As I explained earlier in the chapter, research into HEAW is an emerging field and currently lacks engagement with theory to offer explanations for why administrative work is changing, and why there is a perception of challenge to academic authority. Abbott's system of

professions approach provides a theoretical framework for explaining how and why changes in the work or control of work are changing and led to the third research question:

RQ3: How can a system of professions approach explain the evolution of assessment administration?

The explanatory power of the theory comes from bringing together all the elements described above (environmental forces, work tasks, problems, diagnosis, inference, treatment, knowledge, influence, authority) to understand the connections between them, and to understand where 'disturbances' have or have not occurred and whether those disturbances represent a contest for power, or the claiming of a vacant jurisdiction. Disturbances represent changes in the balances of power or in the claims that a group of workers can make over work. They often occur when there is a change to the knowledge required to complete a task, when the scale or frequency of the task increases, if new work emerges or if the work task becomes obsolete. They can occur gradually or rapidly. For example, work may be routinised and delegated to non-experts when knowledge is codified, or where knowledge is assimilated by a non-expert group.

For Abbott it is the disturbances in the work, the battles for control, that are important to understand:

> "The system model implies that the stories that need to be told are not the stories of professions but of jurisdictions and jurisdictional conflicts." (1986, p.192)

I have adapted Abbott's concept of jurisdiction to explore influence and authority, so building on the statement above, I sought to tell the story of how changes or continuities in the influence and authority of administrators in assessment have evolved. I adapt Abbott's concept of disturbance to more broadly refer to changes in the division of labour, influence or authority.

Using Abbott's concepts, it is possible to identify where changes in the division of labour, influence and authority have occurred, have not occurred, or could soon occur, and to characterise those changes as either the result of a contest for power, or the filling of vacancy in work. Characterising the changes in this way will contribute to the debates about whether academic authority has been lost.

Conclusion

Through this chapter I have set out the core gaps in knowledge that this research sought to fill. I have shown that the higher education environment is characterised as complex and diverse, yet we currently lack knowledge about how the external environment is affecting administrative work. I have suggested that research into HEAW is an emerging patchwork, that has surfaced themes about the evolution of administrative work and knowledge, but which has not yet focused on understanding English academic administration. I have suggested it is important to investigate how administrative influence and authority is changing within HEIs, because there is a narrative that academics have lost authority which is sometimes attributed to administrators, and this can have negative impacts on workplace relationships.

I have also shown how research into HEAW has used both qualitative and quantitative approaches, explained the value I have found in qualitative explorations, and challenged the use of survey methods for investigating the concept of influence. I have explained how I believe that gaps in the research literature can be filled by adopting the theoretical framework offered by Andrew Abbott, to answer the following research question:

How does applying a system of professions approach to the examination of assessment administration within English higher education institutions explain the changing nature of higher education administrative work?

I have explained how I have adopted and adapted Abbott's concepts to develop three research sub-questions, and in the next chapter, I describe how I conducted this research.

Chapter 3

Methodology, data generation and analysis

Introduction

In this chapter I provide a descriptive account of the research process. I begin by re-stating the research questions that my research sought to answer. I explain how my research is shaped by my philosophical position which has in turn shaped my qualitative research design. I set out the decisions that I made about the research design, including defining the area of 'assessment administration' that my research explores and my selection of participants. I explain the key methods of data generation, participant role maps and qualitative interviews, and describe steps I took to ensure I conducted my research in an ethical way. I describe the layers of data analysis that took place to code the interviews, and to analyse the data using concepts from Abbott's framework, in particular distinguishing between the analysis of assessment decisions, the forces shaping assessment administration, the nature of contemporary assessment administrative and how I use the analysis to make claims about administrative influence and authority. I conclude by summarising how the findings of the analytic process are reported through the rest of the thesis.

Research Questions

In the introductory chapter I set out the research question that guided this research:

> How does applying a system of professions approach to the examination of assessment administration within English higher education institutions explain the changing nature of higher education administrative work?

In Chapter 2, in response to the gaps identified in the research literature, I illustrated how I developed sub-questions which I employ Abbott's concepts to answer.

RQ1: How and why is assessment administration changing?

RQ2: What influence and authority do administrators have over assessment?

RQ3: How can a system of professions approach explain the evolution of assessment administration?

Throughout this chapter I describe how I undertook this research and made decisions about how to answer these questions.

Research philosophy

My research philosophy and approach are informed by my ontological position (my own world view). I am interested in how the present has been shaped by the past and believe the present needs to be understood within it's social, historical, and political context. I view reality as socially constructed; that is, what is perceived to be real or valued can be specific to an individual or group and can change as society changes. My ontological and epistemological positionings are reflected in, and reinforced by, my academic studies to date where, as an undergraduate, I combined the study of sociology and history to explore historically situated social experiences, values, and norms, such as constructions of childhood, motherhood, and sexuality. I read widely on topics, crossing disciplinary boundaries between sociology, history and psychology, and my cross-disciplinary background is probably why I found connection in Abbott's theory, which has developed from an historical and sociological approach. Given my ontological view, my epistemological position and approach to research can be described as interpretivist, that is, I value data that is generated from an individual's perspective, that can be understood within their wider social, cultural, and historical context.

Interpretivist approaches typically generate qualitative data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), and the purpose of qualitative methodologies is debated, as it can be used to generate description, explanation, create concepts, generate, or test theory (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Abbott's theory has been used by others in an interpretivist paradigm, as have qualitative data generation methods, which I return to in the section on research interviews. Qualitative research provides an in-depth and intricate understanding of meanings, as it gives voices to participants and can "probe issues that lie beneath the surface of presenting behaviours and actions" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p.288). The methodological approach of interpretivism and qualitive data generation can be considered subjective, and the notion of validity in qualitative research is contested. Some have suggested it is more appropriate to talk about rigor in qualitative research, such as a strong research design that is appropriate for the research questions (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen and Spiers, 2002), and trustworthiness. Others have argued that validity is not in-built to a particular method – it must be

demonstrated by the researcher in the conclusions they have reached "by using that method in a particular context for a particular purpose" (Maxwell, 1992, p.284).

In my research, I have tried to achieve and demonstrate rigour in various ways. One of those was through extensive verification – "the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain" (Morse et al, 2002, p.17). As I will describe in the section on data analysis, I conducted multiple layers of analysis, scrutinising the data through varying lenses, making connections between themes, checking for both consistency and outliers, and revising themes and claims as an iterative process. Other ways I sought rigour and validity has been through commencing initial analysis during the data generation process in the form of a research diary, noting methodological issues and reflections on the data generated, so that I could adapt the data generation if needed.

In this research, I wanted to understand, from the perspectives of administrators themselves, the realities of their work, how their work was changing, and their perception of their authority in assessment. Furthermore, as I signalled in Chapter 2, there are institutional and disciplinary variations in teaching and learning approaches which means that understanding the context assessment administration operated within was important, and I sought rich contextualisation. My own methodological choices reflect my valuing of the perspectives of those who have a prime position to provide insight into their own experiences and provide expert commentary on assessment administration in an English context. They have also been shaped by the practicalities of doing research in higher education as part of a professional doctorate which brings with it some potential constraints on time, resources, and availability of participants, which I expand on in the next section.

Research Design

This research explored 13 senior and middle administration managers' own perceptions and understandings of their roles in assessment work, and their understandings of the work of their colleagues within their HEI. These administrative mangers worked in different English HEIs and had expertise in different elements of assessment administration. I took a qualitative approach and analysed their accounts thematically, drawing on concepts derived from Abbott. In this section I set out my research design, including how I selected participants and gained access.

<u>Defining the research area: assessment administration</u>

As no definition of assessment administration exists, I developed my own based on my professional experience and informed by practitioner guidance (JISC, 2016; QAA, 2018).

Assessment administration relates to:

- Activity that enables the delivery of the student assessment experience.
- At a 'process' level, it starts with the design of assessment tasks, and concludes when a student completes their academic studies without complaint.
- At a 'structural' level, it includes any institutional frameworks that structure how workers or students undertake assessment activities.

This definition shaped my selection criteria for participants, seeking participants who could provide insight into assessment processes or structural changes, discussed next.

Selecting administration manager participants

I made an early decision to focus solely on administrative perspectives of the participants' work, rather than including academics' perspectives. This was because, as higher education administrative work (HEAW) is an emerging field, my original focus was on generating thick description of what administrators do, giving a voice to those not represented in the literature to date. In the previous chapters I highlighted there is diversity in administration units and responsibilities, which brought complexity to the design for selecting administration manager participants from multiple HEIs. Including academics perspectives at this stage would be too complex and would not have added sufficient value for this initial research. Reflecting on my own experience, it would be challenging to identify one academic colleague, other than a member of the senior management team, who would have a perspective on the range of administrative activities related to assessment I was involved with. Additionally, I was already conscious of the potential challenges in securing the engagement of the administration managers themselves.

I decided to interview administration managers, rather than junior administrators. In the project's early phase in 2017, I conducted two pilot interviews with junior administrators and concluded that the data generated would not provide suitable insight about who was involved in decisions and about the drivers of change. I hoped that middle-senior administration managers could serve as expert commentators on assessment administration, being "especially knowledgeable about a topic" and could "provide valuable insights into the root

of problems, what has been tried and failed, what has been tried and worked, and future trends to watch" (Patton, 2018, p. 648). I judged that these administrators would have insight into administrative work supporting assessment across their HEI and potentially other HEIs they had worked at.

I sought participants through two sector-wide distribution lists that I was part of: ARC Members and ARC Assessment Practitioner Groups[5]. As I wanted expert commentary, I wanted to hear from individuals who were actively involved in the sector, which their presence on this mail list indicated. I gained approval from the Chair of the Academic Registrars' Council, and the ARC Executive Committee that I could circulate an invitation to participate in this research through the list before circulation. The invitation to participate **[Appendix 1]** was distributed and those who expressed an interest were provided with a Participant Information Sheet [**Appendix 2**] and asked to provide some personal, career and role-related details through an online questionnaire to inform participant selection [**Appendix 3**].

I planned a purposive sampling approach, expecting to interview between 10-20 administration managers. This sample size was based on the decision that I would undertake in-depth interviews with expert commentators who could "take the researcher inside a phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2018, p.648) and aligned with my interpretivist approach.

Participants were sought who met the following criteria:

- Currently has responsibility for aspects of assessment administration – to ensure suitable seniority and experience.
- Substantial experience of assessment administration (5 years+) – to ensure participant could offer perspective on changes over time.
- Experienced institution-wide change in assessment in the last 5 years (preferable) - explore a specific change example in depth and their engagement with the change.

[5] UK Higher Education Institutions pay a membership fee to be part of the Academic Registrars' Council. The ARC Members List includes up to two nominated individuals at each institution with the equivalent responsibilities of an Academic Registrar. The ARC Assessment Practitioner list includes up to two nominated individuals at each institution with responsibilities for assessment-related administration.

As this research was exploratory, I also sought variation in the sample, in terms of their HEI size, HEI mission group, and individual experience to allow comparisons between different contexts.

Only 11 administration managers volunteered from the call for participants, fewer than I had hoped, possibly because I expressed particular interest in those who had experienced an institution-wide change related to assessment in the last five years. Nevertheless, all 11 volunteers met the selection criteria, and were included in the project as their online questionnaire suggested that each would bring a unique perspective to an area of assessment administration. I chose not to circulate a second invitation to participate, instead retaining flexibility to review the sample size after the first round of interviews. An additional two administration managers, known to me through my network and who met the selection criteria took part in pilot interviews, and they were happy to be included in main data set, bringing the total sample size to 13.

I conducted the interviews in October-December 2019 and spent December 2019-February 2020 transcribing and familiarising myself with the data generated. I reviewed the data to understand the breadth of experience and ground covered, so that I could decide whether to conduct further interviews. In the end, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I determined further interviews would not be appropriate. As a senior administration manager within an English HEI, my research was put on hold during March-May 2020 as I worked as part of my university's senior learning and teaching group to put in place alternative policies, procedures, and processes in response to the pandemic. Potential participants would have been experiencing similar challenges and disruptions to work impacting their ability to participate. Furthermore, the research sought experiences of higher education administrators at a specific point in time and the Covid-19 pandemic was reshaping higher education work. I thought conducting interviews during or after the pandemic would be researching a different context and would increase the scale and scope of this research beyond what was feasible. Nevertheless, I believe that the claims that I make through this thesis hold-up in a post-pandemic environment.

The appropriate number of interviews in qualitative research is debated in the literature, although Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) suggest between 6-12 are sufficient for purposive samples, others argue that it is better to consider the richness and thickness of the data rather than the sample size:

> "The easiest way to differentiate between rich and thick data is to think of rich as quality and thick as quantity. Thick data is a lot of data; rich data is many layered, intricate, detailed, nuanced, and more. One can have a lot of thick data that is not rich; conversely, one can have rich data but not a lot of it. The trick, if you will, is to have both." (Fusch and Ness, 2015, p.1409)

Having reviewed the transcripts, I was confident I had generated data that was both thick and rich; the thirteen two-hour interviews produced a large volume of data that touched on all key areas of assessment administration, with detailed and nuanced examples of specific activities and change.

Each participant was allocated a pseudonym, and their key characteristics which demonstrate the variation achieved are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Summary

Role	**Role Level Description**	**HEI Size[6]**	**Pseudonyms & Expert Insight**
Senior Manager	Individuals with a portfolio of strategic responsibilities within their institution at a senior level, either as the equivalent to an Academic Registrar or Deputy Academic Registrar.	Large or Very Large	**Janet:** Regulations **George:** Exam boards **Esther:** Systems & Data
		Small	**Peter:** Strategy **Kirsty:** Specialist HEI **David:** Systems & Specialist HEI
Head of Service (Registry Operations)	Operational management and some strategic involvement, comprising multiple assessment areas that typically fall within 'Registry' administration such as: formal examinations, mark administration, Boards of Examiner, student results, graduation.	Large or Very Large	**Carol:** Centralised assessment administration **Hayley:** Examinations **Michelle:** Examinations & Regulations
Head of Service Specialist (Student Casework) (Quality)	Operational and strategic oversight of specific areas of work that involve assessment.	Large or Very Large	**Anna:** Student Casework **Brian:** Quality

[6] I defined very large institutions as those with more than 25,000 students, large institutions as those with 10,000-24,999 students, and small institutions as less than 9,999.

Assessment Manager - Operations	'hands-on' roles for one or more aspects of assessment operations	Large or Very Large	**Sarah:** Regulations
		Small	**Louise:** Small HEI

Data Generation

Data was generated through an initial participation questionnaire, job descriptions, role maps and qualitative interviews. In this section I focus on describing the role maps and the qualitative research interviews, the latter being the primary data used for formal analysis.

Role maps

In my professional work I run workshops and develop training and engagement activities that enable individuals to convey meaning or gain understanding in ways other than talking. I asked participants to map out visually, in advance of the interview, the colleagues they worked with to deliver assessment administration. I called these visuals role maps, and I included them in the research for two main reasons. The first was to help me gain insight into the individual's work context, identifying boundary work and the division of labour with their colleagues; similar activities have proven helpful to surface how an individual sees their organisational context (Schratz and Walker, 1995) and allow the researcher to understand meanings that might only be tacit for the participants (Trowler, 2008). In a higher education context, concept maps have been valuable in exploring perceptions of the doctorate (Kandiko and Kinchin, 2012) and credibility (Kandiko Howson, Coate and de St Croix, 2018). The second reason to include a role map was to encourage time for reflection on their role in advance of the interview to add depth to the examples and discussion of administrative work. Activities that have been prepared by participants in advance, such as area maps, self-portraits and photo voice have been used in education and health research in an "attempt to go deeper" (Horgan, 2016, p.252), and allowing "a more layered" view of the individual's environment (Cannuscio, Weiss, Fruchtman, Schroeder, Weiner and Asch, 2016, p559).

I provided instructions for creating a role map **[Appendix 4]** taking a photo of the role map at the start and end of the interview, capturing any amendments or annotations that were made to the map during the interview itself. Three administration managers did not create a role map in advance, and so I created a map as part of the conversation and sent a copy to them after the interview for verification. If a role map had been created in advance of the interview, it was used during the interview; initially, in an open way, allowing the participant to convey

the meaning they had created from their map. It was then used as a starting point for questions about the nature of work the individual carried out, with different parts of their network, and the expectations of them in their role. The maps were visually diverse, depending on the individual's approach to reflection on their own work and role. Two participants indicated that the process of creating the map had been a valuable activity for them professionally as one had discussed it in their appraisal, and another intended to discuss it with their line manager.

The maps had been intended as a formal analytic tool as part of the research process, but in the end were used primarily as a tool to support the interview process and to help shape my understanding of the individual's work context. These are included in **Appendix 5** and have been redacted or edited to replace identifiable aspects with generic terminology.

Qualitative research interviews

The primary data generated and analysed came from the transcripts of semi-structured qualitative research interviews. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, qualitative interviews have been widely used in HEAW research and have value in exploring the division of labour (McMaster, 2005). In the context of exploring work jurisdiction outside higher education, a range of qualitative approaches have been used. Some used participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis within a single case-site (Ray, 2001; Oh, 2014; Johannessen, 2018), seeking broad insight into how and why jurisdictional contests may occur. However, most relied on interview data, sometimes supplemented with documentary analysis to examine a specific area of work in depth (Mueller, 2001; Kotb, Roberts and Sian, 2012; Kroezen, van Dijk, Groenewegen and Francke, 2013; Verbaan and Cox, 2014). Participant observation was not practical for this research, and I thought that sufficient insight into the work and perceptions of authority could be elicited from the combination of interview and role map.

My interviews aimed to gather descriptions from administration managers about the work they or their colleagues carry out. By hearing from expert commentators, I wanted to learn from the manager's, from their experience, what they think about their work and interpret (Coe, Waring, Hedges and Arthur, 2017). The interview topics were shaped by the theoretical framework: they sought to elicit understanding of administrative contributions to decisions and contributions of change; the drivers for institution-wide change; and administrator's perceptions of how their work has changed over time. They had three main parts:

1- Understanding everyday assessment administration, through rich description of the work that they undertook, utilising their role map, to understand how and when they worked with others to deliver assessment administration
2- Understanding contributions to change and decision-making, through detailed description of institution-wide changes, and areas where administrators perceived they took decisions
3- Gaining insight from the administration managers' expert position in the field into how assessment administration has changed, may change in the future, and the big issues that are facing their institution in relation to assessment

The final topic guide used for the interviews is included as **Appendix 6**. As my interview technique developed, the topic guide became shorter and more thematic: role, purpose, relationships, change, decision-making, extenuating circumstances, looking back, looking forward, institutional challenges. The interviews took approximately two hours and took place at the administration manager's place of work or nearby. They were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and the transcripts sent to the participant for verification. I noticed differences in the level of detail relayed by the operational managers compared to the senior managers, and my interview approach adapted to reflect this.

I adopted a semi-structured approach to allow for open-ended questions. In practice, I tailored the research interviews based on what the participants had already told me in their online questionnaire about their involvement in institution-wide change. I also asked managers to provide copies of their job descriptions in advance, which 11 of the 13 did. Before each interview I read the online questionnaire and job description to become more familiar with the individual's context. Occasionally I used the questionnaire and job description as a reference in the interviews, but typically these were contextual documents to aid me as a researcher in gaining insight into the individual's current context. My topic guide also included a specific question on the extenuating circumstances process, as I anticipated that by exploring the same specific process in every interview, I would have a specific area to apply a comparative lens to. I did not prioritise this aspect of the interviews, because I wanted them to be shaped by the participant in terms of the depth of each area, so this topic was explored only if there was sufficient time.

Ethics and anonymity

The research was approved by the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics Committee in 2019. Participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet, consent form and privacy notice. I was clear with all participants that if there were any details they provided or examples they gave that were particularly confidential then to flag those during the interview or afterwards as part of the transcript review. Anna, Brian, David, and Janet each signalled specific areas during the interview that must remain anonymous; these, and any additional areas I thought should be revised to protect anonymity, were highlighted in the interview transcription that was sent back to each participant for their confirmation of accuracy.

I found that all participants spoke freely about their work, although some required more prompting than others. Two individuals I had invited to participate as pilot participants through my existing network, and one participant who responded to my call was known to me through previous activities in the sector. As participants knew that I was employed in similar roles to theirs, I found that often participants would ask me questions about my own practice and experience during the interview or make comments that referred to my own experiences. As I wanted the interviews to be conversational, I responded to questions about my own practice if they were asked.

Anonymising and presenting data

A key ethical concern of mine was ensuring the administration managers were not inadvertently made identifiable by the different terminology used within each HEI for teams, activities, or academic roles. So, as part of the anonymisation of quotes included in the thesis, these potentially identifiable terms have been replaced with generic terms and are quoted in [square brackets]. I refer to and quote from the administration managers in different ways through this thesis, and have sometimes edited empirical data reported for succinctness, clarity, or anonymity, adding or removing words as appropriate; I also show these in [square brackets].

For example, in the following quote *[Hayley's Team]* has been added in to clarify in the text who Hayley was referring to:

> *"they [Hayley's team] are experts in the credit framework"*

In the following quote specific roles have been replaced with the generic term *[academic leads]* to ensure the participant was not identifiable by role titles in their HEI:

> *"I convened a meeting of our [academic leads]"*

In the following quote text has been removed for succinctness:

> *"to get to a point [...] of saying"*

I draw on the evidence from the interviews in three different ways throughout the thesis.

I paraphrase, particularly where making claims that relate to multiple participants drawing comparison. I indicate which interview they came from by including the pseudonym name(s) at the end of the statement in brackets such as:

> an institution introduced a formalised checking process (Anna)

Where I want to convey precise language used by participants, short phrases, or short quotes, I include these within paragraphs, using italics and quotation marks, and including the pseudonym name(s) at the end of the statement such as:

> Departmental teams are described as *"allies"* to Central teams (Hayley)

Where I want to convey rich description of a situation described by a participant, or examine an example in depth I use longer quotes from participants as an indented quotation, citing the pseudonym name(s) at the end and replacing any identifying words with more generic terms in square brackets such as:

> *"so if they see something that, some decision that has been made that is outside the regulations, they will go back and say 'you can't do this, you have to change this'"* (Hayley)

Having set out how the key aspects of the data generation process, I move on to explain how I analysed the data.

Data Analysis

In this section I describe the key steps I took to analyse the data, supported by illustrations in **[Appendix 7]**. As I explained at the start of this chapter, the analysis comprised multiple

layers. I begin describing the initial stages of familiarisation before describing how I analysed the data using Abbott's concepts.

Analysis began during data collection, by making field notes after each interview, capturing my initial impressions of the interview, of the individual and reflecting on the technicalities of the interviews process so that I could enhance the data generation as the research evolved. These notes were akin to what Burgess describes as a substantive account of the interview, such as where and when it took place, a methodological account and initial elements of an analytic account (Burgess, 1981). An extract of these notes after the interview are included in **[Appendix 7, Illustration A].** After completing the 13 interviews, I listened to each audio recording, validating the transcription, and familiarising myself with the data. I made preliminary notes of things I found particularly interesting and created an individual summary of each interview outlining the ground covered and identifying key extracts. This helped me to immerse myself in the data **[Appendix 7, Illustration B].**

I undertook inductive, open coding of two interviews covering different ground (David, Michelle), identifying descriptive codes related to each section of text. I reviewed and grouped these descriptive codes into more analytic codes and went through several cycles of this to establish high-level themes that represented parent codes: the work, forces, knowledge, examples of change, examples of decisions, challenges & issues. I imported the data into Nvivo and I coded all transcripts using the parent codes I had developed.

It was at this stage, after inductive coding, that I was reassured that I could use Abbott's framework as a lens to analyse the data and as a theory to seek explanation for changes in assessment administration. From this point on, my analysis comprised three core components, which aligned to Abbott's framework.

1. The contribution of administrators to assessment decisions
2. The forces shaping assessment administration
3. The nature of assessment administration

Through each of these lenses, I was able to gain insight to what Abbott calls the 'knowledge system', which is critical to understanding how the control of work changes. In the rest of this section, I describe each of these parts of my analytic process in turn; however, it is important to note that the process was iterative, with each stage providing new insight that caused me to

deepen or revise some interpretations or themes from earlier stages. This iterative process of the three components of analysis is represented in the following visual.

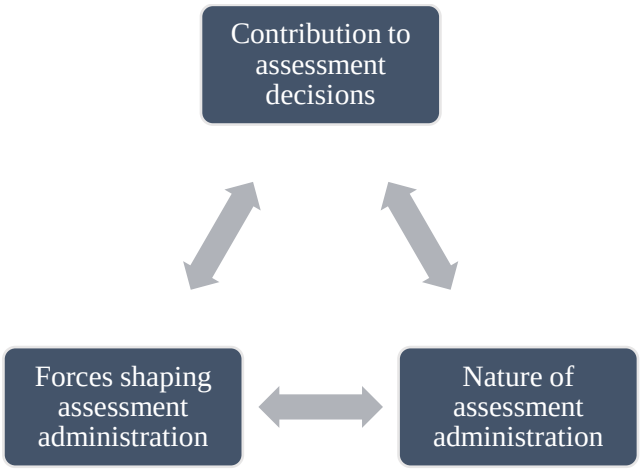

Figure 1: My iterative analysis process

Analysing contributions to assessment decisions

I begin by describing how I analysed assessment decisions, because although this was not the first stage of my analytic process, it was a critical stage that informed my final conclusions about the environmental forces, the nature of contemporary assessment administration and ultimately the claims I make about administrative influence and authority. It is also the most complex stage that utilised and adapted Abbott's concepts of diagnosis, inference, and treatment and from which I claim I have made a methodological contribution to knowledge.

According to Abbott, examining who is involved in the acts of diagnosis, inference and treatment when solving professional problems can help us understand how the work of an occupational group is changing[7]. To do this, I isolated analytic moments where these acts could be examined by conceptualising assessment decisions as professional problems, distinguishing between:

- Everyday decisions about assessment that required the same type of decision to be taken frequently within an established decision-making framework

[7] *Diagnosis* involves classifying a problem; *Inference* involves reasoning about the problem; *Treatment* involves taking a decision.

- Decisions to change assessment practice or process

During this stage of analysis, I pooled the data from the 13 interviews, moving the initial focus from the individual experience to the collective experience. This part of the analysis bears some resemblance to analytic approaches used in phenomenography, grouping experiences together to identify the different ways that a phenomenon is experienced (Booth, 1996); in this case, the different ways that administrators contributed to assessment decisions. When doing such analysis, Entwistle (1997) highlights the importance of the researchers detailing the practical research procedures used to identify categories, to demonstrate the rigor of the analysis. Analysing these assessment decisions involved logging, analysing, categorising, and looking for patterns and then explanations in the data. I now describe each of these steps.

Logging assessment decisions

I created a log of assessment decisions in a spreadsheet. These were initially identified from the interview data coded as 'examples of decisions' and 'examples of change'. I then reviewed each interview in its entirety to ensure comparative examples had not been missed, an example of my verification process. For instance, if I had logged a decision from one participant about a student's request for a deadline extension, I reviewed relevant data for other participants to ensure the same example was logged from other participants if it existed. Most examples of assessment decisions were surfaced through general discussions about the work, probing questions about the administrator's role and discussions about change, although in some interviews I explicitly asked individuals if they personally took decisions. Sometimes administrators indicated their anticipated involvement in an anticipated change, which I also logged.

I logged 261 examples of assessment decisions. If the same decision was discussed by five different participants, it would be counted as an example five times and entry on the log assigned a form of administrative contribution (discussed below). An excerpt of the log is included in **[Appendix 7, Illustration C].** Logging assessment decisions in this way involved an element of subjectivity and some examples were difficult to log, such as those where problems were connected. For example, where there had been a decision to change an academic strategy, and this had several stages to its implementation, and it generated multiple connected problems and associated decisions. Additionally, not all examples of decisions

were explored in sufficient depth within the interview for me to interpret the administrator's contribution to diagnosis, inference, and treatment at an individual level. The final number of assessment decisions that were fully analysed was 240.

Analysing contributions to assessment decisions

Analysing the assessment decisions went through several iterative cycles, centred around understanding how and why administrators were involved in the acts of diagnosis, inference, and treatment. Initially, I tried to ascertain how the administrator was involved, asking the following questions of the data:

- Who is making the decision? (treatment)
- Who is reasoning about the options? (inference)
- Who has identified the issue? (diagnosis)

Administrators were involved in each of these acts for different decisions. However, I found that the distinction between diagnosis, inference and treatment was insufficient, because administrators were contributing to assessment decisions through various combinations of these acts. I started to develop the analytic concept of 'administrative contributions' to describe the qualitatively different ways that administrators described their involvement in diagnosis, inference, and treatment, and ultimately their authority. I identified four forms of administrative contributions, defined in Table 2. I used different adjectives for the everyday decisions and changes decisions, that reflected the more complex contributions to change problems.

Table 2: Forms of administrative contributions to assessment decisions

Authority	**Contributions to diagnosis, inference, treatment**	**Contributions to Everyday Decisions**	**Contributions to Change Decisions**
Academic	Engaged in diagnosis of issues	Supporter	Initiating
	Engaged in diagnosis of issues Enabled others to undertake inference	Guide	Facilitating
	Engaged in diagnosis of issues Engaged in inference	Expert	Recommending
Administrative	Engaged in diagnosis of issues Engaged in inference Engaged in treatment	Decision-maker	Decision-maker

Additionally, regardless of whether administrators were initiating, facilitating, recommending, or deciding changes, they were involved in implementing decisions about change, which sometimes involved further decisions.

Administrative contributions are an analytic concept that helped me work with the data in more depth to look for patterns and variations in how administrators contributed to assessment decisions. It has informed my understanding of the forces shaping assessment and the nature of assessment administration and has informed the claims that I make in the rest of this thesis. In the next section I explain how I used the concept of administrative contributions to explore, categorise and look for themes in the data.

Categorising assessment decisions

I categorised each assessment decision in numerous ways, allowing me to ask different questions of the data, to look for patterns and variations across the data set, and to then seek explanations for the patterns of variations using my findings about 'environmental forces' and the 'nature of assessment administration' (discussed later).

Each assessment decision was categorised based on the type of administrative contribution, whether the decision was 'everyday' or 'change', the area of work the decision related to, and whether the decision was about something that structured the work – which I refer to as the HEI structure. As I worked with the data more and started to interrogate what knowledge administrators were mobilising to contribute to assessment decisions, I also categorised the decisions based on different forms of knowledge mobilised. The categories are set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Categorising assessment decisions

Category description	**Category**
Administrative contribution	Supporter, guide, expert, decision-maker, none Initiating, facilitating, recommending, decision-maker, none
Decision	Everyday, change
Area of work (process)	Assessment setting, examinations, student casework, exam boards, systems set-up, curriculum & quality, student information, operational incident
HEI Structure	Strategy, frameworks, technology, assessment process, workforce
Knowledge	Process, student experience, technical, regulatory, institution

Looking for patterns and seeking explanations

Having established the categories of assessment decisions, I explored the relationships between them. I looked for trends and anomalies in the type of administrative contribution and the different ways I had categorised the data. At the highest level, I found patterns in the way that administrators contributed to everyday decisions compared to change decisions, in decisions about different areas of work, in decisions about the HEI structure, and in the way that administrators were mobilising knowledge to engage in these decisions. My analysis then drew on Abbott's theory to seek explanations using the concepts of 'forces' shaping assessment administration, and the 'nature of assessment administration'. I tried to understand why a particular contribution existed in its current form, first focusing on understanding the different types of knowledge being used by administrators in their contributions to assessment decisions, and then looking to the forces and the nature of work.

For contributions to everyday decisions, I tried to build a picture of the context within which the decision was being taken, to understand why a decision was needed. I interpreted this from how administrators described the nature and purpose of their work, which I had already gained insight to from thematic analysis (described in the next section). I used the emergent themes and the patterns I was finding in the contributions to everyday decisions to deepen my understanding.

For contributions to change decisions, where there was a clear pattern of administrators contributing to decisions as experts, and sometimes decision-makers, I tried to understand the drivers for change. Typically, these were easily identifiable from the discussion of the change itself in the interview, but sometimes wider interpretation of the interview and of the external context was needed. I had already been building an understanding of the 'forces' shaping assessment administration from thematic analysis (described in the next section), and I used those emergent themes and the patterns I was finding in the contributions to change decisions to deepen my understanding of those forces, and how they were impacting assessment administration.

My analysis of administrative contributions to assessment decisions is the foundation of many claims I make in this thesis. In Chapter 5 I use my findings about administrative contributions to assessment decisions to make claims about administrative influence and authority, which I describe in more detail at the end of this chapter. In Chapter 6 I tell the

story of three different evolutions of assessment administration, showing different trends and changes in the contribution of administrators to assessment decisions.

Analysing the forces shaping assessment administration

According to Abbott, the core work of an occupation group is continually shaped and re-shaped by social and cultural forces. I wanted to understand what forces were shaping assessment administration, so that I could understand how and why assessment administration was changing and to make sense of the authority and influence administrators demonstrated over assessment. Identifying the environmental forces had two main analytic stages.

The first stage was a thematic analysis of the interview data that I had coded as 'challenges & issues' and 'change'. This data set typically included examples of:

- Challenges described by participants in their description of assessment administration
- Responses to a direct question from me about the most challenging aspects of their work or for their HEI in relation to assessment
- Reported perceptions of changes to their work (looking back and forward)
- Described drivers of changes to processes (small-scale and large-scale)

This data was inductively coded, and themed. Initially, challenges were themed as: structural; culture & environment; processes; knowledge & understanding; people; and resources. Changes were themed as: continuous improvement; large-scale change; change culture; changing responsibilities; use of technology; external bodies; and internal frameworks.

The second stage came from analysing assessment decisions (described above). My analysis of assessment decisions revealed patterns and variations in the way administrators contributed to everyday decisions and decisions about change. I looked for meaning in those patterns and variations from the forces that were shaping assessment work, first looking at trends, and then comparing specific examples from different HEIs. This stage of the analysis revealed that the forces identified through thematic analysis as shaping 'work tasks' and creating 'problems' were also shaping how administrators contributed to assessment decisions.

This caused me to revisit and refine the themes identified above, and to ultimately produce the final 'environmental forces' that were: external regulation; student body; HEI strategy; HEI technology; HEI frameworks; and HEI change. I report my thematic findings about how these environmental forces are reshaping assessment administration in Chapter 4. I build on these in Chapter 5 to show how forces are leading to more influential contributions to assessment decisions, and draw on them in Chapter 6 to explain why three areas of assessment administration are evolving differently.

Analysing the nature of contemporary assessment administration

According to Abbott, to understand how control over work is changing, it is necessary to understand what the core work tasks of an occupational group are, and what professional problems need more abstract knowledge to be mobilised.

In the absence of existing knowledge from academic or professional literature of what constitutes assessment administration, I spent considerable time undertaking thematic analysis to determine what administrative work and its context looked like for the individuals in this research. This also ensured I had a firm grip of the core data before commencing more complex analysis. This stage involved capturing and analysing, in a methodical and systematic way, the descriptive words used in the account given in the research interview. This process generated 472 descriptions - for example 'data modelling', 'produce paperwork' – which were then reviewed to group together descriptions that were similar or suggest a similar type of activity – for example 'reporting data' 'statistical reports' and 'data quality reporting' were grouped under 'Reporting'. This created the first pass of 43 work descriptions which, in turn, were reviewed again, and grouped together further to generate a shorter list of nine broad descriptors of assessment administration: resolving issues and improving practice; advice, guidance, training; ensuring completeness and compliance; liaising/facilitating; delivering operations; communication & documentation; reporting; system use, development, configuration; applying protocols and judgment. Once the nine broad categories had been identified, a further stage took place to review each interview respondent and the dominant descriptor(s) for their work. This was partly to test validity of the nine descriptors and had the potential to serve as a basis for comparisons between work areas and roles **[Appendix 7, Illustration D].**

I then analysed the 'purpose' of administrative work in assessment. This involved theming the responses that eight administration managers gave when asked directly what the purpose of their work was, and theming additional statements participants made about their perceived purpose of their work. I identified five broad purposes: compliance; student experience; delivering operations; delivering change; equity & fairness.

Having identified key descriptors of assessment administration and its purpose, I drew these themes together with the emergent themes about the challenges of assessment administration, the knowledge used, and the forces shaping the work. I drew connections between each of these areas through three broad themes that captured the essence of assessment administration reported by the administration managers in three spheres:

- Delivering complex assessment operations
- Delivering compliant assessment
- Supporting the academic assessment activity

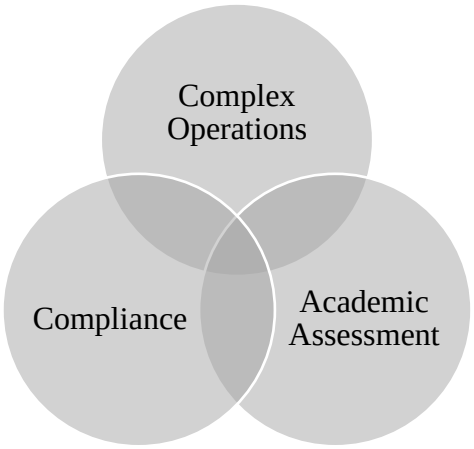

Figure 2: The spheres of assessment administration

I revisited my analysis of assessment decisions, trying to draw connections between the contributions administrators were making to decisions, the nature of the work associated with the decision, and the purpose of the decision, forming a view on whether administrators were contributing to deliver complex operations, improve the academic assessment activity (typically, the student experience of assessment), ensure compliance, or a combination of these.

In Chapter 4 I report my findings about how assessment administration is changing, concluding with a summary of the nature of administration required to deliver complex operations, compliant assessment and academic assessment activities, and the related problems that emerged. In Chapter 5 I characterise the influence and authority that administrators have within these three spheres, and in Chapter 6, as I tell the story of the evolution of examinations, student casework and exam boards, I draw on these descriptions of work to explain differences in their evolution.

Making claims about influence, authority, and changes in control

Having described the core elements of my analysis process, I now explain how I drew on these different elements to make claims about administrative influence and changes in the control of assessment work.

First, I suggest that authority and influence can be claimed by understanding the intersection between administrative contributions to assessment decisions and the nature of assessment administration in those decisions. Administrative influence can be seen when administrators are:

- **Taking decisions:** identified through decision-making contributions to assessment
- **Interpreting and translating existing knowledge frameworks**: identified through administrative contributions that support, guide or provide expert advice
- **Contributing to strategic decisions** that change the nature of assessment, work or knowlegde, through initiating, facilitating, recommending or implementing change

Administrator influence can be characterised by understanding how those contributions relate to the nature of assessment administration:

- Delivering complex assessment operations
- Delivering compliant assessment
- Supporting the academic assessment activity

I report my findings and claims about administrative influence over assessment in Chapter 5 based on themes that emerged from understanding the intersection of these elements across the data set.

Second, I suggest that the control of work can be understood by drawing on all elements of my analysis and seeking to understand whether changes have occurred in influence or authority of administrators, and then characterising the changes or continuities through Abbott's concept of contests for power or vacant areas of control. To do this, I moved my analysis to focus on discrete areas of assessment administration, examining the contributions that administrators made to decisions, the knowledge mobilised, the forces shaping the work and the nature of the work. This level of analysis enabled me to trace the evolution of assessment administration. I report my findings and claims about changes in the control of work in Chapter 6, telling the story of how examinations, student casework and exam boards have evolved.

Conclusion: explaining changes

Through this chapter I have described how I have conducted this research project and how I have analysed the data. I have explained that there were three core elements to my analysis, informed by the system of professions theoretical framework: administrative contributions to assessment decisions; forces impacting assessment administration; the changing nature of assessment administration. From these analyses I can make claims about the changing nature of assessment administration, influence and authority.

I report my findings over three empirical chapters, each dealing with a different research question. I present illustrative examples selected as the clearest illustrations of the findings; for example, the clearest example of how knowledge was being used in a particular form of engagement, or the clearest example of how connections were drawn between forces and administrative engagements. When I present these illustrations, they are indicative of the themes. If there are variations or anomalies, I am explicit about this in the relevant sections.

In Chapter 4 I draw on the themes arising from my analysis of forces shaping assessment administration to answer the question how and why is assessment administration changing? Chapter 5 draws on multiple elements of my analysis to answer the question: what influence and authority do administrators have over assessment? In Chapter 6 I use my findings to these research questions to explain changes in the control over assessment. In each of these chapters, I signal the relevance of these findings to the research literature. In Chapter 7, I discuss the implications of these findings for our knowledge about higher education administrative work, future research and for practice.

Chapter 4
Changes in assessment administration

Introduction

According to Abbott (1988), social and cultural forces exert pressure that can re-shape work. When work is re-shaped, it's qualities may change, the required knowledge may change and ultimately the workers responsible for doing the work may change. Understanding the forces shaping assessment administrative work and knowledge is therefore a critical step in adopting a system of professions approach to explain changes in assessment administration.

In this chapter, I present the themes that emerged from my analysis of the administration managers' descriptions of their work; of specific examples of change; and of their expert perspectives on assessment administration in the English higher education sector. I use Abbott's concepts to describe how forces have been impacting assessment administration, using work tasks to refer to everyday actions and decisions about assessment, and problems to refer to issues that emerge. I show how forces are creating, removing, or changing the nature of work tasks, creating new problems in assessment administration and indicate where knowledge is being reshaped by these forces. Throughout, I signal how the forces and themes presented in this chapter are drawn upon in Chapters 5 and 6 to explain changes in administrative influence and authority.

This chapter comprises three broad sections. In the first two sections I show how there are identifiable forces that are making the assessment environment more complex, regulated, and uncertain. I distinguish between external forces relating to regulation and the student body, and forces from within individual HEIs relating to their academic strategy, internal frameworks, investment in technology, and approach to change. In the third section I draw out the key themes about assessment administration within this complex environment, summarising the changes to the central tasks of assessment administration, changes in administrative knowledge, and changes in the structuring of higher education work.

I conclude by claiming that the themes reported in this chapter represent an adaptation of Abbott's theory that can now be used to examine changes in the control of work in assessment administration.

External forces reshaping assessment administration

In this first part of the chapter, I show that there were two clearly identifiable external forces shaping assessment work: external regulation and the student body. Both forces are well-documented in the higher education literature discussed in Chapter 2, as forces impacting academic work, and so I focus on surfacing the impact that these external forces were having on administrative work in assessment, which has not been articulated before.

External regulatory forces

External regulation emerged as a critical force shaping assessment administration, where key external agencies have created new tasks and new problems, which have placed an increasing value on external regulatory knowledge within HEIs.

The external regulatory forces impacting assessment administration included legislation, particularly the Equality Act (2010) and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as well as important agencies: the Office for Students (OfS), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and UK Visas and Immigration Compliance (UKVI). Administration managers served as their HEI key contact for these organisations, and their accounts indicated that these external agencies were creating new work, influencing assessment change within an HEI, and impacting the intensity of existing work, which I now expand on.

New work emerged in the form of new everyday tasks undertaken within HEI and change initiatives. At the everyday level, guidance from external agencies triggered new tasks to ensure compliance, which administrators often undertook. Such tasks were most evident in descriptions of quality assurance activities with a concern for audit trails that could stand up to external scrutiny; HEI needed to be on an "*audit-ready footing all the time"* (Brian). External regulation also triggered structural change within an HEI, for example, reviewing resit policies in response to OIA recommendations (Anna) or OfS recommendations (Louise), or amending assessment regulations in response to OfS guidance about credit transfer (Peter).

These external bodies had different regulatory powers and were perceived to exert different forces on assessment administration. The OfS was recognised as an external agency that "*has got a lot more teeth"* (Peter) than the OIA or the QAA:

> *"With OFS it's a completely different level. It needs to be regarded as a strategic relationship and it needs to kind of underpin the entire decision-making process of the university"* (Peter)

This 'underpinning' of HEI decision-making could be seen in the triggering of structural changes, as described above, and limiting change within HEIs. For example, Brian's HEI decided not to pursue a strategic change to its approach to quality assurance because of the OfS:

> *"I think the way that the Office for Students is operating at the moment has actually scared us off doing what we really wanted to do, which was to adopt a more risk-based approach to quality assurance."* (Brian)

Brian's HEI also decided against making major changes to assessment grading schemes following the sector 'statement of intent' (UKSCQA, 2019) and its potential implications for OfS regulation:

> *"We're now super cautious of doing anything because of Degree Outcome statements. Because we couldn't, hand on heart, project what would have happened to our proportion of firsts and 2:1s if we were genuinely getting people to mark on a grade scheme rather than their traditional percentages. Would it have led to an increase, a decrease? Something we have to explain to the OfS? No change to algorithms is probably a good place to be at the minute, at least until we know what happens to those who do."* (Brian)

These extracts convey the sense of uncertainty administration managers reported about the external regulatory environment, which has required them to keep abreast of external developments. Anna captured this uncertainty in her description of the OIA:

> *"But I think almost we wait not knowing what the OIA is going to bring out next. So anything could happen. I mean it's not quite as bad as the Office for Students, but you are sort of on tenterhooks to think 'gosh they couldn't possibly do that next could they?' and then you find they are doing that. And I guess that's an aspect of our work that we can't control. You know other things could happen within the university but, in a way, we have a lot more control about how we react to those. With the OIA we don't."* (Anna)

Administration managers drew connections between the external regulatory environment and an increased volume of existing administrative work tasks. For example, Peter explained new challenges arising from high volumes of changes to module assessments. Such challenges convey how HEI are both trying to respond to changes in the external environment to remain competitive, yet also constrained by the need to make sure changes are externally compliant:

> *"They [academics] want a much freer environment around assessment, and the ability to change it on a whim. And I get the driver for them having 'a live assessment brief', being kind of responsive to the environment or student need or whatever – I get that – but it definitely works against your CMA requirements, and it's quite difficult to manage too."* (Peter)

Through this section I have shown that external bodies have contributed to an environment that is highly regulated, uncertain and with a heightened perception of risk associated with non-compliance. This has resulted in new tasks within HEI to manage and ensure compliance, created new problems that have either triggered or hampered assessment change within HEIs, and implicitly these forces have made assessment administration more intense as the volume and desired speediness of actions has increased.

This external environment requires HEIs to ensure that they develop and maintain knowledge of evolving external regulatory frameworks. In Chapter I show how administrators were mobilising external regulatory knowledge to influence assessment decisions, and in Chapter 6 I show different ways that external regulation is causing changes in the authority over assessment work.

Societal student forces

A second critical force shaping assessment administration emerged from societal changes in the student body. While the student body can be considered a force internal to HEIs, I position these changes as external as they reflect wider social changes and the effects of marketisation. In this section I demonstrate that the size, diversity, and actions of the student body were recognised by the administration managers as shaping assessment administration and describe how new tasks and new problems in assessment administration have emerged as a result. I suggest that these changes have increased the complexity of operational knowledge and increased the value and complexity of knowledge about the student experience of assessment.

Since the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) the student population has grown, almost doubling in size by 2016 (ONS, 2016). As such, the sector is recognised as having transitioned from an elite to a mass higher education system (Trow, 2007). Administration managers (Hayley, Janet, Michelle, Peter, Sarah) explicitly acknowledged that higher student numbers impacted assessment administration, making work tasks more operationally complex and creating new problems:

> *"I think mostly there's been a volume increase, it's just, with the numbers of students growing, the whole operation has had to go up a gear. So we've been having to deal with far larger volumes, and its forced us to look at our processes and procedures and make them as simple and as slick as possible, simply because the students going through are so much larger. That said, there's only so much room you can expand into."* (Hayley)

Operational complexity created new problems, which was particularly evident in examinations management, student casework and exam boards; I discuss the impact of these operational problems on authority over assessment in Chapter 6.

The student population has also become more diverse, with higher numbers of international students (ONS, 2016), higher numbers of mature student learners (OfS Insight 2021), higher part-time student numbers (OfS, May 2021) and a higher proportion of entrants reporting disabilities including mental health conditions (OfS, June 2021). Administration managers were seeing the impact of a more diverse student body on assessment administration, particularly in ensuring assessment was fair and inclusive; in Abbott's terms, the diversity was creating new operational and strategic problems that required new solutions.

At the operational level, there were new challenges in examinations delivery, which had become more complex to support students requiring reasonable adjustments to their examinations (Anna, Hayley, Janet, Louise, Michelle, Peter). Adjustments were needed on an *"enormous scale"* (Hayley) in large HEIs, creating new problems such as a lack of suitable space, and a need for specialist invigilators:

> *"We have specialist invigilators for the reasonable adjustments that are put in place. So we have, basically a pool of invigilators that have experience with – whether its extended breaks or large print or what are some of the others? There's about 5 or 6 broad categories that we have, isolation – where they need to be in a room on their*

own, or they need to be in a room with a low number of people, whether they need a typist, so yeah there's a whole range." (Peter)

Additionally, the complexity around reasonable adjustments introduced new tasks and decisions about what arrangements should and could be put in place to support students:

"Because we've got a limited number of rooms and resources, so we can't always accommodate everything that they want. Particularly if they need their own room. Increasingly, they're asking for their own room, and sometimes a scribe as well, or a reader. Because each time somebody has their own room we have to pay an invigilator to sit with them for 3 hours or whatever, and relief for that invigilator, so it gets very very expensive." (Hayley)

These problems required knowledge of external legal frameworks, particularly the Equality Act (2010) to determine what was fair and reasonable, as well as process-related knowledge about what could be delivered. I discuss the implications of these changes on administrative influence and authority in Chapter 5 and 6.

At the strategic level, a more diverse student body had triggered more fundamental rethinking within HEI about their approach to assessment. This was evident in plans to make assessment more diverse (Peter); more inclusive through alternatives to written examinations (Janet, Anna); and more digital (George, Hayley, Janet, Michelle):

"*I think we'll see a move to more online examinations definitely. I think since I've been here there's been a bigger shift to moving towards […] well, two types really. So, multiple choice kind of questions that are marked, but equally students completing their script on a PC and then academic staff then marking it and so not ever having a physical script […]. When I was at [another HEI], that was a huge area of growth, and a massive amount of essay exams being delivered on PCs which I think is obviously the way forward because students are so used to using computers."* (George)

HEIs had established strategic groups to review assessment strategy and practice, in part, to respond to concerns from the Students' Union. For example, concerns about the high volume of assessment (Brian, Esther, George, Janet, Sarah):

> *"So, [the student union] is very focussed on assessment, and assessment overloading is their big thing at the moment. That sometimes they think that we're over-assessing."* (George)

And concerns over anonymity in the marking process (Brian, Janet):

> *"There's quite a long history to anonymous marking at [this university]. There was a discussion […] and it was driven by students, and it was driven by concern that there was a potential for bias in assessment. Now this is not proven, we have very few appeals which are overturned because of bias. That's one of our criteria for overturning it. So, it's more a perception rather than an actual fact that there is bias in the assessment process, but one of the things the student body has always said is, 'Well if you had anonymous marking, that's one potential route of potential bias taken away,' fair point."* (Brian)

In Chapter 5 I show how administration managers were engaged in solving these new strategic academic problems and how these were creating changes in decision-making authority in Chapter 6.

There were also noticeable shifts in how the student body now engaged in the assessment process that was re-shaping assessment administration. Students use of personal technologies created new problems in examination management (Hayley, Louise), and students were making greater use of supportive procedures such as extenuating circumstances[8] triggering changes to HEI procedures (George, Janet, Louise, Sarah). Administration managers also noted a greater student awareness of their rights, visible in their increased engagement in academic appeals and complaints. The sector-wide trend in complaints has been noted by the OIA (2022), and Peter discussed the reasons for this and the impact it had on administrative work, attributing increased use of these procedures to a fee-paying student body:

> *"There is an increasing amount of student casework, generally. So, students are becoming more and more combative, more and more that they have a set of expectations about what they will receive that are probably out of alignment really*

[8] In England there is mixed practice currently in HEI's language for these procedures, 'extenuating circumstances' or 'mitigating circumstances' being most common.

with the way university works, but, because they're paying they're seeing it from a slightly different perspective." (Peter)

Peter explained that the increased volume of student casework, and the presence of an external body in this area of work has made student casework administration more complex and difficult to deliver:

> *"So it makes procedures more complicated. It makes appeals procedures - and academic misconduct even - much harder to operate because there's that much more casework and the cases themselves […] you know nobody wants to accept a decision. So everything goes through the full remit of stages all the way up to the OIA, and then you're still answering the case two years later, even though there's no case, so it's a lot of work really for not a huge amount of output."* (Peter)

Changes in student engagement with their assessment had placed a new value on knowledge about the student experience, and it increased the value of external and internal regulatory knowledge. In Chapter 5 I show how administrators used student-related knowledge to influence assessment.

Through this section I have shown that the shape, experience, and actions of the student body has made work tasks more complex, creating a higher volume of tasks, and new problems which trigger assessment change. These changes have implications for knowledge, which are unpacked in more detail through Chapters 5 and 6.

HEI forces reshaping assessment administration

Having reported how external forces were creating new work tasks, shaping strategic decisions within HEIs about assessment, and reshaping knowledge, in this section, I explore how HEIs are responding to external forces. I suggest that an HEI represents a weighty force in their own right, reshaping assessment administration through their academic strategy, internal frameworks, and investment in technology. I discuss each of these in turn, and then consider their approaches to change.

Academic strategy: diversifying academic provision

HEIs were diversifying their academic provision, through partnerships, types of curricula and their delivery model[9], which was creating new work tasks, more intensified work tasks and new problems.

Several HEIs had partnered with other English and international educational organisations, (George, Louise, Sarah), which was increasing the volume of work, increasing the complexity of regulatory activities that needed to be adapted to new contexts (George, Sarah) and changing the responsibilities of administrative teams when specialist partnership administration units were created (Louise, Sarah). Sarah felt that her job description had not kept pace with the changes in her work arising from academic partnerships:

> *"I think what is missing from that [job description] now is because of the increase in the number of partnerships, both abroad and home, the amount of time that I spend working with the [partnership unit], and the amount of time that I actually then will spend explaining things to partners.*" (Sarah)

Two HEIs had diversified their curriculum portfolio through delivering apprenticeships (Brian, Sarah), which created new tasks such as bidding for contracts which are *"demanding, short notice, big value"* (Brian). Several HEIs had also changed how they delivered their curriculum throughout the academic year, for example moving to semesters or having multiple cohorts start dates in an academic year (George, Michelle, Sarah).

Diversifying the academic provision or the way it was delivered made some assessment work more pressurised for both academics and administrators. This pressure was most evident in examination management and exam boards (Carol, George, Hayley, Janet, Kirsty, Louise, Michelle, Sarah). Sarah tried to convey the impact:

> *"Well, it's the complexity of the delivery patterns that we have and the start dates and the fact that we're expected to - when I say 'we' I mean not just [administrators], academic staff as well - possibly may be teaching the same unit three times in a year, and how you fit […] the exam boards […] and the examination periods [in]. When, if*

[9] I use the term delivery model to refer to elements such as how, when, and how often academic courses/programmes are delivered. For example, campus-based or distance, the timing of the academic year and assessment periods, single or multiple intake cohorts in an academic year.

entry points were lessened, you probably could cope extremely well – I mean they do cope extremely well, but people do then get burnout from, you know, just the pressure on them all the time." (Sarah)

The combination of all these pressures was making phases of the academic year more intense. In some cases, it meant there were multiple critical activities being delivered at the same time:

"There are lots of different tensions all at the same time. So you might have exams for one cohort, graduation for another, registration is constantly going on and then you'll also have exam boards for the academics who are also expected to be teaching. So you devise this sort of delivery and gone is the idea that you come in October, you might have a few students doing a February start, [now]the expectation is that you're going to deliver all the way through the year, which then brings all those tensions to play and then you end up in positions where actually all you're doing is firefighting all the time trying to resolve those issues." (Sarah)

Even within a more traditional academic year structure, administration managers reported a loss of time to reflect between big activities:

"So, when I first got to the university, we would have a big event such as registration, and then you would have some time in which you could think 'was that the best way, shall we change anything' and you had time to draw breath before the next thing. At the moment we go from one hugely mission-critical activity, straight into the next. With virtually no time to do that. So we make minor changes here and there, where we can, but we don't get the opportunity to go away and to step back and to look at it from a distance and say – does it work? As a whole? And that's something that really needs to be done in many areas. So you muddle through. Because you don't really have time to properly look at what's underneath. That's a big frustration." (Hayley)

Through this section I have shown that decisions about academic strategy such as how an individual HEI structures and delivers their academic provision can create new work, more intensified work, and new problems in assessment administration. In Chapter 5 I discuss the contributions administrators make to solving these academic problems, and in Chapter 6 I discuss how these strategic forces are creating changes in the authority over assessment.

Structure of internal frameworks

In addition to academic strategy, the structure of HEIs internal frameworks shaped and reshaped assessment administration. Earlier in the chapter I described how external forces created additional work tasks and problems, many of which were enacted through internal frameworks. Administration managers discussed a raft of institutional procedural frameworks such as policy, regulations, statutes, and manuals that set out how assessment should operate. These frameworks set out various marking practices, such as who can mark, how second marking operates, whether marking is anonymous, and whether a judgement is conveyed as a numerical mark or grade. They also set out rules about how module marks should be calculated, how penalties should be deducted for late work, and how award classifications are determined. Such frameworks created works tasks to monitor and ensure compliance, they represent a form of regulatory knowledge, and changes to these frameworks represent problems in Abbott's terms.

All administration managers described changes to internal frameworks, and significant changes were common (Brian, David, Esther, Janet, Louise, Michelle). Examples of changes to internal frameworks included: eligibility criteria for resits; permitted number of assessment attempts; 'capping' of resit marks; calculating degree classifications and using alpha rather than numerical grades (Brian, Carol, David, Esther, George, Hayley, Janet, Louise, Michelle, Peter, Sarah). Additionally, some HEIs changed assessment strategies (Brian, George, Peter, Janet) marking criteria and marking process (Brian, Carol), and assessment procedures that shape how student casework operates (Anna, David, George, Janet, Louise, Peter, Sarah).

When changes to internal frameworks were described in-depth, they revealed a shift within HEIs towards more standardised procedural rules, driven by a concern for consistent decision-making and fairness to students. Janet described a suite of changes made to internal regulations to make them less complex and more standardised:

> *"It was so bad and so confusing [...] so there's a bit of the tidying up but also there's fairness for the students and there's the work of – you're probably aware of them – the northern universities consortium - that have done a lot of work on social justice in assessment and how you can have the same student with exactly the same assessment marks getting different outcomes according to which university they're in or which department within a single faculty even, and how things are handled. So it's*

> *trying to be a lot fairer, so we're treating students the same unless there is a very good documented reason why you can't treat them the same, so the professional body requirements for example."* (Janet)

Without standard regulations, problems – in Abbotts terms – arose. For example, it was difficult to have an institutional view to identify trends and issues, it was more complex to investigate appeals, and more difficult to provide clear support and advice to students (Anna, Janet). Janet explained these challenges:

> *"Just trying to find your way about how to deal with a student in a particular situation. And what to do with this student who's failed this module, or not attended that module, or has interrupted their studies, but they didn't do this before they interrupted, and now they've come back and that module's not running, you know all those kind of complicated situations."* (Janet)

Implementing regulatory change was reported as complex, sometimes requiring the "*phasing"* of new regulations for new student cohorts while the old regulations continued to apply to existing students. Janet explained:

> *"And we've got phasing-in in some cases as well, they're applying to all students who registered on modules as of [the start of the academic year], but then we've got [repeating students and interrupting students]so we've ended up with something that's a little bit complicated to articulate [to make it fair]"* (Janet)

Knowledge of internal frameworks had become increasingly important to assessment decisions, and the shape of the frameworks impacted work tasks. I expand on how these frameworks impacted administrative influence over assessment in Chapter 5, and how they structured the work in Chapter 6.

Investment in technology

The increasing role of technology has been highlighted in higher education work (Middlehurst and Barnett, 1994), higher education administrative work (Gledhill, 1996; Graham, 2012; 2013) and assessment (Rhoades, 1998). Abbott (1988) positioned technological forces as external forces; however, I have positioned these as internal to an HEI workplace. This is because, although administration managers reported a clear general trend

in the increased use of technology to support assessment delivery, I found variations in how technology was changing the nature of work tasks, increasing the value of technical knowledge, making some work tasks obsolete, and introducing new problems which can be attributed to internal HEI decisions.

Broadly, all HEIs in this research were on the same journey to improve student administrative processes, including assessment, through technology. David, an expert in systems and data, described this journey as a transition from conceiving a system as a *"database to hold a record of what's happened"* to conceiving that "*the database actually drives the delivery of services"* (David). In assessment administration, this journey reflects a transition from simply storing assessment data such as numerical marks or decisions of exam boards on a student system to populate degree certificates and transcripts, towards services such as students viewing their assessment details online (David); requesting coursework extensions online (Esther, Louise); and having assessment marks trigger bespoke student tasks or communications related to those marks (Hayley).

Using highly configured systems created new tasks associated with maintaining the system, particularly in relation to data configuration and data quality. Configuring these systems also required technical knowledge, and, as I will show in Chapter 5 and 6 required the combination of this technical knowledge with regulatory knowledge. Louise explained how she worked with colleagues who configured the system:

> *"They're the ones that are building the systems. We use SITS as our student system. So, they're the ones that we work with to be able to make sure everything is set up correctly. So the algorithms that happen through validation are translated to [SITS], we would work that out with them. So they take the information from the validation and then it's really only until people are on the courses that you can start checking. There's quite often things that crop up […] so you have to go, 'Why isn't this award working out correctly?', or, 'This programme title doesn't appear to be correct.'"*
> (Louise)

Introducing technology made previous 'manual' tasks obsolete, for example: electronic coursework submission removed manual receipting tasks (Carol, George, Kirsty, Louise, Sarah); online feedback replaced paper feedback (Kirsty); enabling electronic exam paper submission (Janet, Hayley, Michelle); electronic attendance monitoring replaced paper

registers in examinations (Hayley) and enabling external examiners to review assessments electronically (Kirsty).

Using technology to support assessment introduced new problems when technology failed (Carol, Kirsty). For example, a new type of problem emerged when a technical system error prevented students from submitting their electronic coursework on time (Carol). Technology was also being used to solve problems such as inefficiencies. For example, complex projects had been established to connect systems – particularly connecting the virtual learning environments where student assessment may be submitted and marked, to the student record system, where results were formally processed and stored (David, George, Esther).

My analysis suggests that these 13 HEIs were in different places on the journey to use technology to support assessment, and their place on this journey shaped assessment administrative work. Broadly, each HEI fell into one of two groupings relating to their investment in systems.

Administration managers in the first group, described signs of continual and incremental investment in their system development, in ways that showed strategic recognition that using technology could bring efficiencies (Esther, George) or improve the student experience (Kirsty, Louise). These HEIs used their systems to deliver electronic submission of assessment, electronic feedback, integrated virtual learning environments and student record systems for the automatic transfer of marks and reported high levels of configuration with assessment regulations to support exam boards.

Descriptions from administration managers in the second group portrayed a lack of strategic or continual investment of their system (Carol, David, Janet, Hayley, Michelle, Sarah) resulting in a system setup that was *"clunky"* (Carol, Sarah), and required manual *"workarounds"* (Carol). Such systems appeared not to be widely understood internally, a "*black box"* (Hayley) where configuration issues gradually came to light. Their technical complexity and resultant manual processes sometimes created challenges with data quality and efficiency (Janet, Sarah). Sarah captured the position of these HEIs well:

> *"Over the years here, since we first put in the system, we have under-invested in the student records area and that has a profound effect on the results that we're able to produce across the institution. Both in terms of the regs, in terms of exam boards, in*

terms of assessment, because we're not getting smarter with, we're becoming more manual, we're going completely in the wrong direction." (Sarah)

There was a sub-set of this second grouping who had recently acknowledged the need to invest in their systems to support student and assessment practices, triggering new system implementations or re-implementations to bring better performance, efficiency, and consistency (Carol, Hayley, Janet). A system implementation represented major change for the HEI and for administrative work and such a change required assessment administration managers to spend some, or all, of their time focused on the technical project.

This section has shown that there was a clear trend towards making better use of technology to support assessment, particularly in the configuring of student systems with assessment regulations, but variations between HEIs on the level of investment in that system, which impacted the shape of assessment administrative work and knowledge. Administrative assessment work was therefore becoming more technical or in Abbott's terms, its qualities were changing, and new problems were emerging because of using technology. In Chapter 5 I show how administrative influence is evolving because of greater use of technology in assessment and in Chapter 6 how technology is impacting administrative work and authority differently in examinations and exam boards.

Approach to change

In the previous sections I have reported ways that HEIs were reshaping assessment administration, structuring the work through their academic strategy, internal frameworks and investment in technology. In this section I build on those findings to reflect on the HEIs' approaches to change, which begins to illustrate the inter-connectedness of an HEI's strategy, frameworks and technology. The internal HEI environment was described as *"a state of flux"* (Michelle), echoing the uncertainty described earlier in this chapter from the external environment. This characterisation reflects themes in the scale of change, pace of change and complexity of the intersections of changes.

There was large-scale change, seen through changes to strategy, frameworks and technology reported in the previous sections. Furthermore, many HEIs had delivered multiple large-scale assessment changes at the same time (Brian, George, Janet, Michelle, Carol). Managing assessment administration in this environment was described as *"plate spinning"* (Brian), detailed in the following excerpt:

> *"There's a huge number of different considerations that you have to keep an eye on at any given time. Such as, well, keeping your ear to the ground on what's going on at a local level, trying to spot any emerging risks before they become big problems, managing the annual cycle of republication of policies and negotiating changes to those, managing the expectations of the rest of the university about how much you can change and how quickly"* (Brian)

Brian perceived the scale of change at his HEI as both "*a blessing and a curse"* where major change was refreshing, bold and ambitious, but it came with the risk that *"you rush into something that has an adverse impact that you weren't expecting"* (Brian). The scale and pace of change made planning and prioritising assessment administration difficult, and keeping on top of increasing expectations challenging:

> *"You could have a best laid plan, but if a new initiative comes out of left field that you weren't expecting, that could damage the prospects of you delivering on the promises that you've already made. And what typically happens is you get, 'Well, yeah, but you've still got to deliver on all that other stuff,' and that's a real problem for systems development and policy development, that there's just too much trying to go through the funnel of approval."* (Brian)

Approaches to change were sometimes contradictory. On the one hand administration managers reported knee-jerk, extreme, or top-down decisions (Brian, Carol, George, Michelle, Sarah), echoing the descriptions above of quick-paced left-field changes. However, there were also accounts of change being slow, taking more than one cycle to embed or requiring widespread consultation (Anna, Brian, George, Janet, Peter). Hayley observed this contradiction within her own HEI, which sums up the overall data set where there was a grand desire to change and to modernise, but simultaneously resistance to make the necessary changes that will have the desired impact:

> *"At the moment the university is trying to move towards a rules-based system, but kicking against it at the same time. So it likes the idea of everything being nice and clockwork and simple, until it applies to something that they want to do. And then, then it becomes slightly different. And there is a lack of proper consultation."* (Hayley)

David remarked on this contradiction at a sector level as well. He acknowledged ample change had taken place affecting day-to-day practices on the ground, however, when reflecting on his career working in assessment administration, taking a high-level view, he felt that very little had changed "*in the view from Mars, the process at the beginning and the process at the end look very similar*". David expanded on this from a technology perspective:

> *"It has changed a good deal less than I might wish it had changed I think. It still looks to me, very recognisable from what it was before. You know we're still using most of the same software systems, you know if you look back 5-10 years ago […] it was an earlier version of Excel, but I think Excel was pretty critical in many people's marking process 5 or 10 years ago, and obviously if you look across the kind of student record packages that we were using – SITS was obviously huge 5-10 years ago as it still is now"* (David)

And from an assessment process perspective:

> *"In terms of the process, again, I think that we're still, you know in very similar places […] our whole system of quality assurance, module boards, award boards, and external examiners, still feels terribly nineteenth century. And not well grounded in evidence."* (David)

Through this section I have suggested that an HEI's approach to change can create a more uncertain internal environment for assessment administration, which in turn creates additional challenges for delivering assessment administration. I have also begun to show how these forces are interconnected, a theme that I develop further in Chapter 5 in my discussion of administrative influence, and in three illustrations of the evolution of assessment administration in Chapter 6.

Assessment administration in a complex environment

Through this chapter I have shown how external and internal forces were making the assessment environment more complex, regulated, and uncertain. These forces were reshaping the central tasks of assessment administration: creating new work tasks, making existing work tasks more complex and creating new problems. They were also reshaping the knowledge required to undertake those tasks and solve new problems. In this final section of

the chapter, I draw out the core themes arising from these findings, and signal how I draw on these in the rest of this thesis to explain changes in administrative influence and authority.

Changes in assessment administrative work

I have identified forces that are reshaping work tasks and creating new problems. Building on my analysis of the nature and purpose of assessment administration surfaced in Chapter 3, assessment work and problems can be understood in relation to three spheres: operational, regulatory, or academic. I briefly describe how the core tasks of assessment administration related to these spheres were changing, and new problems emerging.

Delivering complex assessment operations - operational problems

Assessment administration was becoming increasing complex and new operational problems were emerging, typically relating to process or technology used to support processes.

Assessment administration was intended to ensure a smooth operation, described as *'the cog'* (Louise) or *'engine room'* (Hayley) in the student assessment journey, that took place both *'behind the scenes'* (Hayley), *'at the coalface'* (Hayley), *'on the ground'* (Michelle) and its purpose was '*making sure that everything runs as it should*' (Janet). It's core tasks involved activities such as data entry of assessment marks, updating a student record, printing examination papers, and tracking activities. Administrative mangers undertook activities associated with monitoring, planning, reporting and logistics, for example modelling the impact of policy or regulation changes.

Operational problems were emerging as the scale of administrative work increased to deliver operations for larger numbers of students. The work was becoming more technical as systems were used to support more efficient operations such as maintaining rules about the pass marks for assessments or maintaining data about an assessment so that a mark could be entered, or so that examination timetables can be scheduled.

Delivering compliant assessment – regulatory problems

The assessment environment was becoming more regulated, created new regulatory problems associated with external regulation or internal HEI frameworks.

Assessment administration was perceived as important for ensuring compliance, fairness and equity. A range of metaphors were used to describe this element of assessment, which suggested mixed perceptions of the work, from a supportive analogy as a *"backstop"* for students (Anna) to being referred to as *"big brother"* (George); these are discussed more in Chapter 5 and 6. At an administrative level, core tasks involved tracking and monitoring activities and tasks to support the operationalisation of internal frameworks, such as receipting student appeals. This work includes auditing and ensuring that internal protocols and regulations are adhered to, as well as compliance with external guidance or frameworks. The work was increasing in scale and complexity as a result of a larger and more diverse student body and was becoming increasing regulated shaped by external or internal frameworks.

Enhancing the student experience of assessment – academic problems

Environmental forces were creating new academic problems, typically relating to academic strategy, assessment principles, pedagogy, and student engagement in assessment.

Academic problems were making assessment administration more challenging, particularly when changes to strategy occurred, making operations or compliance tasks more challenging. Additionally, assessment administration was becoming more student-centred, seen in its operational tasks and compliance activity. There was a greater awareness of student expectations and actions, driven by external forces. Administrators were often the first point of contact and conduit of information for the increasing student body, and they were responding to changes in the student assessment experience by making changes to their practice.

Contemporary assessment administration

Overall, assessment administration was becoming more complex, regulated and student centred, with some central tasks subject to increasing scale, diversity, technological change, regulation and changing student expectations simultaneously. New operational, regulatory, and academic problems were emerging. I draw on these themes of how assessment administration was changing in Chapter 5 to make claims about administrative influence. These changes were reshaping knowledge, which I now turn to.

Changes in assessment administrative knowledge

Having determined that administrative work tasks were undergoing changes that made the work larger, technical, student-centred, regulated, and complex, I now summarise themes that emerged about administrative knowledge; there were new forms of knowledge, and existing forms of knowledge were being revalued.

From my analysis of administrative work and contributions to assessment decisions, I was able to derive a definition of assessment-related knowledge, and from this, identified a major theme in the evolution of administrative knowledge: it had become more diverse than described in the research literature. In Chapter 2 I explained that administrative knowledge was typically described as 'generalist' rather than 'specialist', and there were indications that it was process-related, technical, and regulatory in form. I found these forms of knowledge evident in assessment administration, in addition to student-related knowledge and HEI knowledge. I defined each form, which constitutes new knowledge about the nature of administrative work. These are set out below:

***Process knowledge**:* Required to deliver the day-to-day activities that keep processes running; in this case, the activities that make sure the whole assessment process is delivered. It includes planning, logistics, workforce management, finances associated with assessment.

Technical knowledge: Required to use, maintain, and develop technology to support assessment. This may be how a system works, the maintenance and development of the system, or knowledge about the technical infrastructure.

Regulatory knowledge: Related to external or internal regulations, policies, or procedures, as well as legal knowledge. In assessment this includes: external knowledge relating to OfS, OIA, QAA, GDPR, UKVI, Equality Act 2010; internal frameworks including assessment regulations, marking policy, grading schemes, procedures for assessment complaints, misconduct and extenuating circumstances.

Student knowledge: Related to the student's experience or expectations about assessment, that may be external or internal to the HEI.

Institutional knowledge: Related to the holistic and connected understanding of how the HEI strategy, frameworks, technology, and processes relate to each other, or are connected to the external environment.

Through the rest of this thesis, I draw on these forms of knowledge as part of my explanation for changes in the division of labour, administrative influence, and authority. In Chapter 5 I illustrate how administrators mobilise these different forms of knowledge to influence assessment, and in Chapter 6 I show how these forms of knowledge have developed a different value in examinations, student casework and exam boards.

The structuring of higher education assessment work

Through this chapter I have demonstrated how external and HEI forces were creating new work tasks and problems which are changing assessment administration. In this section I draw out the themes about how assessment work was being structured, reflecting on the historical status of and HEI as a force shaping assessment work.

As I explained in Chapter 2, in the English higher education sector a distinction is often made, in practice and research, between the characteristics of individual HEI, either based on mission groups or their status to award degrees. In research on administrative work, differences have been noted between HEI that had degree awarding powers and university title before the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) – referred to as 'pre-1992' and those who gained these powers after 1992 'post-1992'. I considered the extent to which the changes reported in this chapter were being shaped by an HEI's historical status. The administration managers currently worked in different types of HEIs:

- Pre-1992 - Anna, Carol, Hayley, Janet
- Post-1992 - Brian, Esther, Michelle, Sarah
- New or small HEI - David, Kirsty, Louise, Peter

I found that there were some differences in how assessment administration was perceived to be changing based on an HEI status, particularly in relation to how the student body changes affected assessment administration. Those with pre-1992 status highlighted the force from the increasing size of the student body (Anna, Carol, Hayley, Janet), those with post-1992 status emphasised the diversity of the student body (Brian, Esther, Michelle, Sarah), and those in new or small HEI appeared closest to the student's experience of assessment (David, Kirsty,

Louise, Peter). Such variations reflect the different impact of marketisation on HEIs and their administration; pre-1992 HEI typically benefitted from the removal of the student number cap in 2015; post-1992 HEI have diversified their academic offering through partnerships, multiple entry cohorts or widening participation; and smaller HEI attracted a particular demographic. Furthermore, smaller HEI had smaller administrative structures which brought administration managers closer to the students than in large HEI.

HEIs without their own degree awarding powers also appeared to be affected by external forces differently. As validated providers, they had a different relationship with the OfS to HEIs with degree awarding powers, which shaped the work and created difference problems because *"the whole OFS thing and HESA thing is developing very rapidly for this part of the sector"* (David), and because these HEIs are subject to forces from their validating partners (Kirsty, David). I draw out further implications for validated HEIs and small HEIs in Chapter 5 and 6 when discussing influence and changes in control.

Despite these differences that could be linked to an HEI's status, I found there was broad commonality in the overall emergence of forces shaping assessment administration, particularly in the emergence of new complex problems. For example, the following problems were emerging in multiple HEIs despite different status:

- Large, complex, and concurrent changes to their internal structures (Janet, Michelle)
- New problems with examination space (Hayley, Janet, Michelle)
- New problems in exam board complexity (Janet, Sarah, Kirsty)
- New problems with new curriculum portfolio (Janet, Brian, Esther, Sarah, Louise)

Given the broad commonality in forces shaping assessment administration, I suggest that to understand administrative work, and to improve practice, we need to move away from focusing on an HEI's status, and instead focus on understanding how HEI are structuring work through their HEI academic strategy, HEI internal frameworks, HEI investment in technology and HEI approach to change.

Through the rest of this thesis, I argue that through their strategy, frameworks, technology and approach to change, HEIs have considerable power to shape how assessment administration, the division of labour, administrative authority and influence over assessment evolve. The impact of these internal forces on administrative work is not visible in existing

research literature, and represents a blind spot (Rhoades, 2010) in our collective understanding of how and why administrative work is changing; a blind spot in our scholarly knowledge and practical knowledge as HE leaders and managers. These findings alone have practical implications for HEI leaders, which I discuss in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on building an empirical understanding of how administration managers perceive the work that constitutes assessment administration in English higher education to be changing, and I have drawn on Abbott's concepts of forces to explain why changes are occurring. I argue that there are recognisable 'forces' that have put pressure on assessment administration, which are changing what constitutes everyday assessment work tasks, generating new problems that require new solutions, and reconfiguring or revaluing forms of knowledge. I suggest that although assessment administration is operating within a complex external environment, HEIs have the potential to make assessment administration more complex or less complex through strategic decisions they take about their academic strategy, internal frameworks, investment in technology and the scale and pace at which they deliver changes to these areas.

The identification of these forces shaping assessment administration represents the first step of applying a system of professions approach to understanding changes in assessment administration, and a contribution to knowledge. These findings reveal insight into the changing nature of higher education work, and the potential power that individual HEI have, to minimise or create additional complexity within their organisation. They surface blind spots in our knowledge in research and in practice about the changes in administrative work and the forces that structure work.

I build on these findings in Chapter 5 to make claims about administrative influence and authority, and in Chapter 6 to explain different evolutions of administrative authority in examinations, student casework and exam boards. Through these chapters, I continue to signal 'blind spots' in our understanding, that the application of the system of professions approach is highlighting and continue to build my argument that HEIs have the ability to shape administrative work, authority and influence in ways that could deliver organisational benefits.

Chapter 5
Administrative influence and authority in assessment

Introduction

In Chapter 4 I proposed that external and HEI forces are making assessment administration more operationally complex, regulated and student-centred, which is changing everyday work tasks and creating new problems. In this chapter I focus on understanding what administrators are doing to contribute to these reshaped work tasks and to solve these new problems. It addresses the second research sub-question: what influence and authority do administrators have over assessment?

I explained in Chapter 3 how I used Abbott's concepts of diagnosis, inference and treatment to understand administrative contributions to assessment decisions, and from that analysis, derived my definition of indicators of influence and authority:

- Taking decisions on assessment
- Interpreting and translating existing knowledge frameworks
- Contributing to strategic decisions that change the nature of assessment, the nature of work or who undertakes the work

I make claims about the influence and authority that administrators have over assessment, structuring the chapter around the emerging operational, regulatory, and academic problems surfaced in the previous chapter. I found these three types of problems reflected different themes in administrative influence and the mobilisation of knowledge: administrative authority over assessment operations; administrative expertise in assessment frameworks; and administrative strategic support for academic matters.

As I report these findings, I discuss their significance in relation to the existing literature which positioned academic administration managers as bounded professionals with limited spheres of influence. I discuss differences in the inclusion or exclusion of administration managers in strategic academic decisions highlighting implications for HEI leaders. I conclude by summarising my findings about administrative influence and the mobilisation of administrative knowledge.

Administrative authority over assessment operations

In Chapter 4 I argued that assessment administration now operates in a more complex environment. In this section I report how administration managers were involved in delivering assessment operations in this more complex environment, indicating that there was a clear sphere of administrative authority related to assessment operations. I found that administrators:

- Took decisions as part of everyday operational tasks
- Transferred knowledge to others on operational matters
- Took decisions that changed the structure of work or knowledge

There were 60 examples of decisions which I deemed primarily related to assessment operations. It was often difficult to distinguish between administrative decision-making for everyday decisions and those that changed the structure of work or knowledge in assessment operations, as small incremental changes to administrative work appeared to be common. Many administrative decisions related to examinations and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Administration managers demonstrated a clear perception of the boundary of administrative authority, which was particularly noticeable when they initiated changes, sometimes taking decisions themselves, but other times seeking academic authorisation. When administrative decision-making was reported, there were clear spheres of administrative authority where I suggest non-academic knowledge has become more critical than academic knowledge to these specific decisions. I provide illustrations in the rest of this section, distinguishing between everyday operational decisions and solving operational problems, before reflecting on what administrative influence over operations reveals about the changing nature of academic administrative work.

Everyday operational decisions and knowledge

As described in the previous chapter, a core purpose of administrative work was to ensure smooth operations, and to ensure "*that everything runs as it should"* (Janet). Ensuring a smooth operation involved implicit process-related decisions, such as checking and tracking activities associated with a process, and taking decisions to send reminders, or escalate issues. Such implicit decisions included: following up on outstanding actions from curriculum change activities (Peter); identifying and escalating gaps in assessment marks (Carol);

responding to non-submission of examination papers (Michelle); and escalating problems arising from the absence of exam invigilators (Sarah). Everyday tasks also included technical decisions, particularly about the set-up and maintenance of data within the student system, raising issues if administrative checks revealed inaccurate or incomplete data (Michelle, Louise). I explore everyday technical decisions in more detail in examining exam board administration in Chapter 6.

Administration managers managed and transferred knowledge within the HEI workforce related to assessment processes and technology. For example, they designed and delivered training for administrative and academic workers on processes and systems, such as: entering assessment marks into the student system (Esther, George, Sarah); processing exam board outcomes on the system (George, Sarah); and examination invigilation activities (Hayley, Michelle). They also maintained guidance documents and information for staff and students such as: process manuals (George); student website information about assessment regulations (Peter); student results letters (Hayley); and student guidance on extenuating circumstances processes (Louise).

Sometimes administrators contributed to complex operational incidents where unusual or unexpected circumstances required a one-off decision to be taken on how to proceed. Such decisions required an interpretation of existing knowledge frameworks such as processes and procedures, as well as technical knowledge and other possible implications. For example, if a technical problem prevented students submitting their online assessment, administration managers drew on existing knowledge about the potential impact of the problem on students, the potential resolution, and what to communicate to students (Carol, Kirsty). In these instances, administrators took the decision, which I suggest was because the resolutions typically required technical, operational and regulatory knowledge, rather than academic knowledge.

Administrative operational problem-solving

Administration managers took decisions that solved operational problems and subsequently changed the structure of work or knowledge. These problems related to process, student information or the management of administrative tasks. Examples of process change decisions are presented in Chapter 6 in relation to examinations.

Administration managers decided how and when students received information about assessment, such as details about assessment regulations or procedural guidance (Louise, Peter) and their assessment results (Hayley, Peter). Hayley frequently authorised changes to student results communications to include more complex information:

> *"Over the years, as there's more and more information that has to be put in things like [student results], there's a new regulation here, there's something here, you've got to remember that, like VISA compliance, and GDPR and so on, and things get added in all the time. And every now and then we will review that because it gets so complicated."* (Hayley)

Administration managers took decisions that transferred the responsibilities between administrative teams or made administrative tasks obsolete. For example, decisions to centralise administrative tasks (Hayley, Michelle); devolve administrative tasks to academic department administrators (Michelle); transfer responsibility between central administrative teams (Kirsty); or replace administrator tasks with technology (Hayley, Janet, Louise). These changes were made to improve the student experience, and to deliver efficiencies:

> *"The driver was a new student system coming into place, and also trying to synchronise the student experience. It's always student experience. And also to try and make things more efficient."* (Hayley)

Administration managers were also contributing to structural decisions through initiating change based on their practical knowledge or implementing academic decisions. I discuss examples of such contributions later in this chapter, and I suggest that administrators had a clear perception of the activities that were within their operational remit, and those which required academic authorisation.

Summary of influence over operations

Administrative decision-making in assessment operations was visible at the everyday level and structural level. Administration managers were transferring and interpreting existing knowledge to other workers and students, this knowledge was process-related and technical reflecting the increasing use of technology in assessment administration. As these decisions typically related to administrative process, technical configuration, or the responsibilities within the administrative workforce, they align with what Whitchurch (2008) described as

functional decisions, taken by bounded professionals; authority to take decisions within the area that they have responsibility for as an operational manager. As such, their presence in the research interviews was expected and signals the persistence of traditional conceptions of administrative authority described in Chapter 2.

Administrative expertise in assessment frameworks

In Chapter 4 I argued that external forces, and increasingly internal HEI forces have made the assessment administration environment highly regulated. In this section I report how administrators were involved in assessment decisions relating to assessment frameworks, which I suggest indicates a clear sphere of administrative influence related to assessment frameworks. I found that administrators:

- Took decisions using assessment frameworks as part of everyday tasks that were not process-oriented or strictly within their functional remit
- Transferred and interpreted knowledge for others, including academics, on framework matters
- Initiated, facilitated, recommended and implemented changes to assessment frameworks that changed the structure of work or knowledge

There were 142 assessment decisions involving assessment frameworks which I deemed as primarily regulatory, rather than operational, which have informed this section. These included everyday decisions related to individual students using an HEI's internal frameworks, which were sometimes complex, or they were decisions related to changing internal assessment frameworks. Authority for changing HEI frameworks was clearly positioned as academic, however, decisions related to regulatory frameworks reflected the broadest range of administrative contributions to assessment decisions. Given the breadth of contributions, I discuss these findings over two sections, focusing first on administration contributions to everyday decisions as decision-maker, supporter, guide, and expert, and then focusing on how administrator's initiated, facilitated and implemented regulatory change. I summarise the influence of administrators over internal frameworks, at the end of these two sections.

I suggest that administrators now hold significant regulatory knowledge that has become more critical to assessment decisions and that their contributions to these decisions signal

emergent shifts in the administrative influence and challenge the positioning of academic administration managers as bounded professionals.

Everyday regulatory decisions

Administrators took some decisions that were based on procedural framework knowledge, external or internal, and as such I refer to these as regulatory decisions. I distinguish between two types of regulatory decisions based on the different way that knowledge was controlled; expert regulatory decisions and delegated regulatory decisions.

Expert regulatory decisions were consistently visible when 'reasonable adjustment' decisions to support students with disabilities were taken (Hayley, Janet, Kirsty, Louise, Peter). Such decisions were required to comply with the Equality Act (2010), and non-academic workers, typically in student support teams mobilised knowledge of disability legislation, supported by examinations administrators to determine the exact arrangements put in place. For example, student support workers might identify that a computer is required for a student to complete their assessment, but examinations administrators might decide whether the student uses a computer in their own examination room or alongside other students also using computers for their examination. I suggest that these have become regulatory decisions rather than academic decisions, as the critical knowledge required to decide on the reasonable adjustments and to implement them is concerned with compliance to the Equality Act (2010), and delivering what is practicable, and that knowledge is now held and maintained by non-academic members of the HEI workforce.

The second type of regulatory decisions reflect authority that was formally delegated to administrators through a regulatory framework. Such decisions were most visible in the area of student casework which I discuss further in Chapter 6 (Anna, Carol, Kirsty), where HEI have clearly documented criteria that could be applied by an administrator to take a decision within a defined context. The delegation of these decisions is similar to what Abbott (1988) calls routinisation, which typically arises when environmental forces create an increase in demand for decisions, and superordinate workers delegate decisions that do not require the same level of expertise, to a subordinate group of workers. In this case, I suggest that academic workers have formally delegated decisions that are not deemed to require academic expertise to administrative workers. Further examples of delegated decisions existed when new decision-making needs emerged associated with quality assurance tasks. Two senior

administration managers with remits for quality assurance (Brian, David) described decisions that were formally delegated to them through their HEI internal frameworks, for example the "*sign off"* (David) stage of an assessment activity to confirm *"whether we've followed our processes"* (David). If either manager felt that due process had not been followed, they would refer the matter back to an academic for further steps to be completed; but they would not dictate an academic outcome, therefore the decision-making authority was confined.

Regulatory decisions taken by administrators align with what Whitchurch described as "choosing between pre-determined options" (2008, p.254) that were characteristics of bounded professionals. Their existence does not challenge existing conceptions of academic administrative work but does offer insight into how and why academic tasks may be transferred to administrative workers which I explore further in Chapter 6.

Supporting and guiding everyday decisions

I suggest there was an emergent evolution in administrative influence over the management and transfer of knowledge related to assessment frameworks, reflecting the forces from external regulation and internal forces. Administrators mobilised procedural or regulatory knowledge to undertake to check, track, monitor processes, and to triage the completeness of documentation. In doing so, they ensured that internal protocols and regulations were adhered to, and supported compliance with external frameworks. This work extended to delivering training and guidance for administrative and academic workers on the application of frameworks.

Administrators informally managed regulatory knowledge when supporting academic processes, for example, triaging student requests for extenuating circumstances or preparing case files, drawing out the pertinent issues to make the decision-making process more effective (Anna, Carol, George, Louise, Peter). Additionally, administrators provided guidance to academics on the interpretation of regulations so that academics could advise students (Brian, David, Louise, Michelle), for example:

> *"Students tend to go to their [academic lead], and the [academic lead] would come to us, you know, 'I've just seen a student. They're worried because they've failed this, can you let me know, you know, when we reach the exam board at the end of the year what is likely to happen.'"* (Michelle)

Administrators were also formally responsible for developing regulatory knowledge in the workforce by providing training and guidance to administrative and academic staff across the HEI (Anna, George, Janet, Kirsty, Michelle, Peter, Sarah). Administrators mobilised regulatory knowledge to support, guide or provide expert advice on a range of everyday assessment decisions including: deciding the mark or grade for a student's assessment; deciding the exam board outcome for a student; deciding the outcome of a student's extenuating circumstances; and assessment complaint or misconduct investigation.

Administration managers used a range of metaphors to describe the ways they mobilised regulatory knowledge to support and guide academic decisions, reflecting mixed perceptions of the work:

- Some metaphors suggested this administrative work was negatively perceived in the HEI, such as "*gate keepers"* (Kirsty, Peter), *"big brother"* (George), *"headmaster"* (Carol), *"keeper of the regulations"* (Sarah) and *"the dark side"* (Janet).
- Some metaphors positioned this administrative work as more collaborative and enabling of sound and robust decision-making, such as "*critical friend"*, *"facilitator"* (Brian), *"guiding hand"* (Louise) and likened to a *"lawyer"* (Janet).
- Anna used the most positive metaphors to describe appeals and complaints administration as "*backstop"*, *"playing defence"*, *"firefighters"* (Anna).

I discuss different ways administrators mobilised this regulatory knowledge in Chapter 6 where administrative guidance was more positively received by academics in student casework than in exam board work. While there were variations in how administrators used regulatory knowledge to support and guide assessment decisions, there was a striking consistency in their contribution to complex regulatory problems, which I now discuss.

Advising on solutions for complex procedural problems

All thirteen research interviews surfaced examples of administration managers providing expert advice to resolve complex procedural problems, particularly problems that impacted students. Such problems required complex inference in the decision-making process to apply abstract knowledge to a situation that did not have a clear outcome. Administration managers were mobilising and applying their expert procedural knowledge to these new, or unusual situations, to make a recommendation on how to proceed, occasionally making the decisions themselves. I suggest that administrative contributions to solving procedural problems signals

a shift in the nature of administrative work. Given their significance to understanding the changes in administrative work, and their consistency across the HEI, I provide more detailed illustrations from the interview data in this section.

Procedural problems typically arose when there was a gap in procedural rules or errors in practice. Brian explained procedural gaps occur because it is not possible for regulations to cover every situation. When there is no clearly defined outcome, the regulations provide a base framework for reasoning about and justifying a decision, and administration managers have the expert knowledge of the procedures to reason about the appropriate decision:

> *"So, there's sometimes room for interpretation, because not every policy can come up with every situation. We're heavily guided by what's written in black and white; so, it's using that as a really important reference point, but there are decisions to be made, it's not necessarily about just ticking things off."* (Brian)

The drafting of procedural documents, which administration managers were also involved in, was important for helping to reduce procedural gaps. Such drafting was described as technical – because of its need for precise language:

> *"The precision of language in drafting [is important] because if you end up with a badly worded regulation, that then can have two interpretations, and you are left with "well if I read it this way, this has that outcome for the student but if I read it that way it has this outcome for the student and I really don't know what the intention was." (Janet)*

Administration managers provided expert recommendations on a range of procedural problems. For example: recommending how to apply HEI procedures for appeals and misconduct if a student was simultaneously subject to both (David, Peter); recommending outcomes on particularly complicated appeals (Janet, Anna); how to deal with complex assessment profiles arising from students' breaks in their study (George, Janet); or failures of process which have impacted the teaching on a course, the information given to students, or how decisions have been made (Brian, George, Janet, Louise, Sarah).

Brian explained how he used his knowledge of regulations when an exam board was not quorate to take decisions on individual students:

> "*We would normally contribute the policy view […] let's say an [exam board] for whatever reason couldn't be quorate because several people were ill on the day. What do you do? So, there might be a reason for panic, 'God, the students need to know their results,' but there's always a way. You can come up with something that's acceptable from policy point of view, that deals with the timescale issue and sorts it all out but you do need people with the know-how to be able to navigate their way around that."* (Brian)

Janet provided multiple examples of using that 'know-how' when solving student issues, finding the problem-solving element of her role one of the most rewarding parts:

> *"Quite often something comes up and they're [academic departments] saying 'we don't know what to do with this' or 'we think this is so and so and the student's going to have to leave' and you can look at it and say 'well hang on a minute, actually if you did that or if the student chose to do so and so then we can resolve this, and give the student another chance to compete the programme'"* (Janet)

Sometimes Janet also had authority to take decisions on how to solve procedural problems, such as deciding whether a student's request for a coursework extension could exceptionally be considered after the published deadline:

> *"So if [a department] thinks there are grounds for the student having submitted the [extenuating circumstances] so late post-board, they then come up to me and I would normally make that decision."* (Janet)

This procedural 'know how' that administration managers mobilised to advise and take decisions on complex student issues was developed through *"time served"* (Brian), *"case law and precedent"* (Janet) and was difficult to develop in others as it required *"working through some cases together"* (Janet), and there were gaps in this experiential knowledge in at least two of these HEI (David, Janet).

These complex cases might have negative implications on individual students if not resolved swiftly and appropriately, which can be challenging if expertise is limited to a small number of individuals:

> *"Well the trouble is, if you've got a student and something needs to be sorted out to know whether a student can re-enrol, and they've got accommodation and everything hanging on it, you can't just sort of say well we'll leave that because there isn't time, somebody has to deal with it"* (Janet)

Similarly, procedural problems described in this section have the potential to have wider implications for the HEI and their reputation. It was clear that administration managers held the relevant regulatory expertise to advise on these complex matters, and, that their knowledge was recognised and valued by others in the HEI. The contributions of administration managers to solving complex regulatory problems was both more influential and more consistent than their contributions to more routine decisions. I explore why this may be in Chapter 6. The contribution also signals a shift towards activities that Whitchurch (2008a) aligned with cross-boundary professionals interpret and translate knowledge to construct a case for a course of action.

Administrative contributions to regulatory change

Having developed 'know how' from working with the regulations in practice, I now show the different ways administration managers used their practical regulatory knowledge to contribute to regulatory change.

Administrative initiation of regulatory change

Administrators were mobilising their knowledge to initiate changes to regulations. In the areas of examinations, Hayley and Michelle initiated, facilitated and recommended changes to regulatory frameworks that would improve the experience of students in the examination room. They had a clear awareness of academic authority for changing policy, engaging the relevant academic groups in the change process. Michelle used her practical knowledge of student's experience in the examination room to identify that the 'reading time' policy was out of date and did not address all the questions students had about its use, so she facilitated the engagement of academic colleagues to modernise the procedure:

> *"The vast majority of our exam papers when we got them, the academics said that the reading time was 10 minutes, and the policy said five minutes unless the exam paper says otherwise. So […] this is outdated, it needs updating, and also, if 95% of our exams have 10-minute reading time, we should just change the policies to say it's 10*

> *minutes' reading time [...] I convened a meeting of our [academic leads] and as well as the adjustment of the length of the reading time, we also clarified what reading time was for."* (Michelle)

Similarly, Hayley used her practical knowledge and experience to instigate procedural change in response to observing the increasing number of students who were bringing mobile phones into the examination room:

> *"We made a case that, with the advent of mobile phones […] this posed a danger to the integrity of the exams and we should have a regulation which banned these devices from the exam room. And that there should be a penalty for anybody that is found with a mobile phone. And that did get incorporated into the regulations at the time."* (Hayley)

Once introduced, Hayley explained that the regulation itself did not stop students bringing phones into the examination room, so she sought alternative solutions within her own sphere of decision-making authority to manage the emerging problem:

> *"In practice there were so many phones. And we tried all sorts of ways of tackling this […] we banned them and we started reporting them…we confiscated them at the start of the exam […] but then that became just a way of babysitting phones, so students would walk in and handover their phone […] and then later we confiscated them and we took them to our security office so they had to go to the security office later on and sign for them […] what is happening now is that rather than confiscating them, which just means more work for the exams team, honestly, the exams team are telling people to switch them off and put them inside, or underneath the desk so that we can see that they are not being used at all."* (Hayley)

These examples illustrate that administration managers had a clear perception of the boundary of their decision-making authority; even though examinations managers took considerable decisions that impacted the operational work and knowledge they sought academic authorisation of changes to formal frameworks.

Administrative facilitation of regulatory change

Administration managers were facilitating institution-wide regulatory change, which I illustrate through the combined accounts of Kirsty and David, both senior administration managers at their HEI. They drew on their knowledge and experience of working closely with their regulatory frameworks at their respective HEI to steer major changes to assessment regulations as part of applications for degree awarding powers[10].

The need for change was driven by a strategic decision to seek degree awarding powers, instead of having their awards validated by another English HEI. Administration managers guided and facilitated the act of inference through wide consultation, contributing knowledge about HEI regulatory needs and challenges, contributing knowledge about external regulatory requirements, and making a recommendation to the Academic Board for authorisation.

They used existing regulations from their validating partners as the base and *"tweaked where we think they don't work for us"* (Kirsty) based on their institutional knowledge of how the regulations operated in practice and existing issues. For example, Kirsty used the opportunity to address a structural issue with regulation, policy and procedural documentation which made them difficult to maintain, and David took the opportunity to simplify the assessment regulations to ensure the small institution could maintain its own knowledge of the regulations:

> *"We're very small, we can't actually maintain a level of expertise in our own regulations that a bigger university might be able to do. So we need to have a very very simple model. So I've kind of completely cut out as much [complexity] as I felt I could get away with."* (David)

As well as using their practical experience of working with the regulations, Kirsty and David drafted proposals for change, and coordinated internal consultation with academic colleagues, before making formal recommendations to a senior decision-making committee. David also used his knowledge of the expectations of external regulators and his understanding of risk to ensure additional scrutiny and sector research took place to justify and support the more substantial changes proposed.

> *"In terms of consultation, we started by having some workshops… what would they [academics] perceive as benefits…so I led those workshops. I collated the feedback. I*

[10] English higher education providers must have degree awarding powers and be registered with the Office for Students to award undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

> *then kind of generated the hit list of the valued changes and we went back, particularly to the [academic leads], to kind of validate that, confirm that that was right […] And so having done that, I then went away and tried to find at least one university that had a rule like that […] because you win no points for style with the QAA. You know, we want to be able as far as possible to say that everything is in line with existing practice elsewhere in the sector."* (David)

Kirsty and David had a clear understanding of their roles to lead the act of inference, and a clear perception of the academic decision-making authority to approve any new regulations. At the time of the interview, the new regulation changes had not yet been implemented.

While these examples come administration managers working within small HEI, they are illustrative of wider examples of administration managers facilitating change, demonstrating how external knowledge, HEI framework knowledge, HEI structure and institutional knowledge was mobilised to deliver change.

Administrative implementation of regulatory change

Administration managers were also involved implementing regulatory change, which I illustrate through a combined example from Janet and Michelle, who were both involved in implementing major regulatory changes to resit eligibility and degree classification calculations at their HEI.

As part of implementing regulatory change, Janet and Michelle were responsible for designing and delivering training on the new regulations, reflecting many of the activities discussed earlier in this chapter about managing the workforce knowledge about regulations. However, as these were major changes, the training approach was more structured, and the administration manager's role appeared more influential:

> *"I was kind of the face of the new regulations, so you know, certain [departments] knew which day I would be in their buildings, and they would come and just grab me and ask questions, and we were doing all the training and the briefing, and all sorts of different things to try and get people au fait and familiar with the new regulations."* (Michelle)

> *"We did an initial briefing on the regulations, at the start of the academic year, we went out and did consultations about the reports that we were going to be providing as part of the new system. We did briefings on what we were actually doing as a result of that, and then there was training for the [administrators]."* (Janet)

For Michelle, implementing the new regulations also involved taking decisions about the responsibilities of the administrative workforce, specifically which administrative team would become the *"experts"* on the regulations to advise exam boards.

As part of operationalising the regulatory changes, Janet and Michelle also had to use their regulatory knowledge to ensure that the student system was correctly configured with the new regulations. To do this, they were not simply authorising the design of the system, they were interpreting the regulations to translate them into the system, interpreting and combining regulatory and technical knowledge. This was systematising knowledge and once systematised, required technical and regulatory knowledge to maintain, and therefore impacted the work and the knowledge characteristics of the work.

The translation of regulations into the system was complex and generated lots of queries that Janet had authority to resolve. For example:

> "W*e've got you know hundreds of different rules and variations […] so there's been quite a lot of sort of coming back to me from the [registry] saying 'we've got this student case and we're not quite sure what should be happening'."* (Janet)

The changes to regulations and the related systematisation of the rules in the system created new problems as it brought to light issues or inconsistencies that might not have been visible before: *"because we had a much more process-driven set of rules in the system this year, there were lots of things that came up as issues that wouldn't have necessarily been spotted before."* (Janet)

Michelle explained that taking technical and operational decisions, and leading the delivery of the new regulatory approach really needed someone who had sufficient technical and procedural knowledge, to interpret the questions being asked and to be able to support administrative teams effectively:

> *"I struggle to think how someone without my knowledge of [the system] would do the [role], because in effect, a lot of the questions were around, once people had looked at the regulations, were around, 'Okay, so I understand the regulations but what do I do in [the system] to get that to happen?' Which, the purely technical people didn't know the regulations well enough to really understand the question, but someone purely from a quality background wouldn't know enough about the system to know, actually, this is what you need to do."* (Michelle)

Both Michelle and Janet were extensively involved in resolving issues that arose during the implementation of regulation changes. For Janet, the issues represented complex student cases and fell within her functional remit for resolving procedurally complex matters (discussed above); and, for Michelle the issues represented complex operational and procedural matters relating to the management of examinations.

These examples are illustrative of wider examples of the engagement of administration managers in implementing regulatory change, demonstrating how critical non-academic knowledge has become to the implementation of major regulatory change.

Summary of regulatory influence

From the examples of administrative contributions to regulatory work it is possible to make claims about administrative influence. First, administrators took a small proportion of decisions based on regulatory knowledge; these were either formally delegated routine decisions or based on expert external knowledge for compliance. Second, administrators were managing the knowledge of administrators, academics and students about regulations, through guidance and training. Third, administrators had developed expert regulatory knowledge through their work as guardians of the regulations, supporters and guides, and this enabled them to engage as experts in solving complex procedural problems that arose and required interpretation. These findings indicate that there has been a shift in the value of regulatory knowledge, and administrators often held this knowledge and therefore were contributing to assessment decisions in influential ways.

These findings begin to challenge the view that academic administration managers are bounded professionals; workers who know the answer and provide disinterested advice based on regulatory fact (Whitchurch, 2008). Administrative contributions through delegated decisions and support could be said to align with the bounded descriptor, however,

administrators were often using their regulatory knowledge to support academics with the act of inference, and they were often undertaking complex inference themselves to make a recommendation. I suggest these contributions show a shift towards more influential engagement, and closer to what Whitchurch (2008) defines as cross-boundary professionals as they are required to assess the unusual situation in front of them, draw on multiple forms of knowledge to make a recommendation about, overall, what is the best route forward for the HEI in those difficult circumstances.

Administration managers were also mobilising their knowledge and experience to positively shape institutional work, through initiating, facilitating and implementing changes to regulatory frameworks; this work also represented complex mobilisation of knowledge in unchartered territory. The widespread examples of procedural problems and influential contributions to regulatory change suggests that such problems are not infrequent, and therefore administration managers are comfortable in navigating ambiguity; another characteristic of Whitchurch's cross-boundary professionals.

Strategic support for academic matters

In this final section I report my findings about administrative contributions to academic matters, which were less influential than over assessment operations and regulations, and the most inconsistent between HEI. I found no evidence of decision-making on academic matters and administrators were not involved in transferring and interpreting academic knowledge frameworks to develop the workforce. However, administrators were still initiating changes to solve academic problems and implementing academic changes.

There were 38 decisions analysed for administrator contributions that I deemed to be academic, based on being related to core academic activities such as setting assessment, marking, feedback or setting academic strategy. I continued to find a strong respect for academic authority over decisions, although administrators did desire more involvement in decision-making for academic change, which I discuss.

Initiating changes to academic problems

In the examples of initiating change, administration managers demonstrated a concern for improving the student experience of assessment. This was particularly evident in smaller HEI where Kirsty and Louise provided multiple examples of initiating changes impacting students

including assignment information, submission, and feedback. On assignment information, Kirsty's administrative team initiated a change to how assignment briefs were written in response to the queries they were receiving from students about their assessment:

> *"We were getting a lot of queries from students who weren't quite sure what they were supposed to do […] if you don't show a word count, the student's obviously got no idea how big a piece of work they have to do, so we were picking up those kind of things that we'd had queries at the [office]."* (Kirsty)

Kirsty's team worked with academics – who retained decision-making authority over the final assignment brief – to improve the clarity of those documents, and they did so in a way that did not challenge the academic's responsibility for this activity, making suggestions rather than dictating changes:

> *"It was, 'We think students might not quite understand this, is it worth rewording it?' Or, 'Can we make sure it's clear how you're weighting the two different elements?'."* (Kirsty)

Both Kirsty and Louise reported initiating change to expand the electronic submission of coursework so that non-standard forms of assessment (Kirsty) and resit assessment (Louise) could be submitted online. In both examples, administration managers mobilised knowledge of the student experience to recognise the benefit this process would deliver to students:

> *"We moved up quite quickly to a high percentage of online submissions. But we had this discrepancy with resits that were still coming in hard copy. And it was confusing for the students if they made an original submission online to then do the same thing hard copy, and some things weren't possible to do hard copy, so I started out scoping a sort of schedule to look at the possibility of moving resits online, how we would manage that."* (Louise)

Kirsty also described working with technical and academic colleagues to implement changes to students' feedback on assessment, revealing that administration managers have an understanding of strategic problems related to the student experience of assessment:

> *"We didn't score very well in the NSS on Assessment and Feedback […] so, we wanted to make the feedback more obvious in how it related to the assessment […] so*

> *we devised this facility where the feedback is fed from the assessment criteria, so this goes into kind of a template, and then the [marker] writes their feedback in the boxes against the specific assessment criteria […] and then that's all published to students, so they'll get their academic mark, they'll see a penalty, they'll see the final mark, and then they see all the feedback very clearly against the assessment criteria"*
> (Kirsty)

Examples of initiating changes to academic matters were only visible from the small HEI in this research. I suggest that this is because the size of the HEI meant that the administration managers that took part in my research were closer to the student experience of assessment than their counterparts at larger HEI due to more centralised administrative processes. Janet, who had previously occupied an administration manager role in a faculty indicated influential contributions to academic changes, which suggests that if my research had included faculty managers or equivalent roles, more examples of contributions to academic changes decisions may have been surfaced. I return to this distinction between smaller and larger HEI in the later section discussing inclusion or exclusion.

Implementing academic changes

In Chapter 4 I reported that assessment administration had become more complex in it operations, regulation and use of technology, and I found that a wider range of assessment-related changes have technical implications, including academic changes. In this section I illustrate how administration managers were critical to implementing academic changes.

Brian provided multiple examples of institution-wide academic changes that had implications on the assessment operation and involved administrators in delivering the changes. One such example related to the introduction of an anonymous marking policy that arose in response to pressure from the Students' Union. A policy decision was taken by an academic committee; however, because coursework was submitted electronically, and marks entered online, implementing the policy required changes to the technical system and surrounding processes. Once the academic decision to change policy had been made, the question became "*what do we need to do to action this?"* (Brian). At this stage, the change was driven jointly by administration and the learning and teaching unit; decisions such as when to implement the change, how to update the system, what students and academics needed to be told, were considered administrative decisions.

Brian described a clear distinction between the responsibility of pedagogic leadership and administrative leadership in delivering changes to academic assessment matters, such as assignment word counts, the volume of module assessment, marking schemes and marking policy. He described the proposals as the pedagogic stage, and once the policy was approved, the learning and teaching unit "*felt their job had been done"* and the *"hardcore delivery of a change"*, including making sure academic departments adopted the new policy, was perceived an administrative responsibility:

> *"To turn the pages on every single [curriculum document] and say, 'Have you made the changes that you're expecting to make? does this look compliant with the new policy?' My team was involved in that because we're responsible for [curriculum document approval process]"* (Brian)

Implementing academic assessment change involved making procedural and process updates to support the new academic approach, including informing students *"to explain how [the new policy] works"* and *"a communication piece"* with staff (Brian). Brian was involved in the decision-making process from an operational implementation perspective, being part of a steering group to *"work up the detail"* in terms of technical developments and *"lead-in times"* to be able to make the change a reality.

There were technical challenges with implementing academic and regulatory changes (Brian, Carol, David, Esther, Hayley, Janet, Kirsty, Louise, Michelle, Peter, Sarah). Updating technical systems to reflect academic decisions took time, and administration managers highlighted these issues to decision-makers:

> *"We did flag up things like time scales, to sort of say, 'Well okay you might want to bring this in, you're deciding this in May, and you want this to come in September, that ain't gonna happen,' because […] we need to set up all the new rules in the system, we've got to have time to do that."* (Esther)

Sometimes decisions had to be revisited if the technical practicalities had not been considered at the time of decision-making (Brian, Carol, Louise) and Brian explained the risks of system implications not being appropriately considered:

> *"We probably had sufficient lead-in time once the academic policy decision had been made, to do the systems work. Whereas some of the other areas that you might want to*

change around assessment, if the decision between the policy being changed and the implementation is too close, that's a very, very high-risk factor in terms of the risk to students of something going badly wrong with their assessments, so trying to create a distance between those two things whilst understanding what the systems' implications are is the ideal situation." (Brian)

Overall, senior administration managers (Brian, David, Esther, George, Janet, Peter) were deeply involved in the decisions about academic change, so that they could advise on the implementation, for example on implementation timelines to update all systems and processes. However, not all administration managers felt involved, which I now explore.

Invisibility of operational matters

Some administrative mangers felt excluded from the decision-making process (Carol, Hayley, Sarah) and some were included but felt that their concerns were not always heard (Hayley, Michelle). Such managers did not seek to influence the academic element of decisions but wanted to ensure that the operational implications of the decisions were understood. Hayley explained:

"I've long lobbied for more inclusion on senior committees, of operational staff, practitioners. I think there's a sense in which, there's a fear that somehow the administration are trying to take over, and they are trying to make academic decisions for academics, and that's not the case – but, there are an awful lot of decisions that are made which are incredibly difficult to make happen." (Hayley)

Hayley continued to express the challenges of not being involved in some decisions:

"Had there been a discussion between the people who it affects at the start, you know about 'what is it that you are trying to achieve?', and then opening it up to practitioners to say right, if you do it this way then you will achieve your aims and we'll be able to manage it for you. Whereas, we will get decisions that are just made, and done, and the attitude is 'just make it happen'. Which is often more expensive, more time consuming, more stressful, and, yeah, that is an ongoing issue." (Hayley)

At Carol's HEI non-academic colleagues were on decision-making groups, and she gave a recent example of a change that had many operational challenges to make it happen. Her

manager was involved in the decision but "*wouldn't have been able to join those dots up"* so decisions were still made without understanding the operational implications. She explained:

> *"It was quite high level and quite senior people, so, it's very easy to look at a picture and come up with an alternative, or what they think is the answer to a problem, without knowing actually how all of those components fit together."* (Carol)

Hayley suggested that academic decision-makers – in particular, senior management – would benefit from a better understanding of the complexity of the business operation:

> *"I think senior management would benefit from it because they quite often – they would benefit from seeing a lot of different activities – but they are so remote from the day to day stresses, and you know, they can make a decision about something [this policy] or whatever it is, but they don't use the daily systems that everybody else does, they don't work in collaboration with so many different people and are reliant on so many different people, and just the frustration, the day to day frustrations – it would be an education for them*." (Hayley)

I suggest that the exclusion of those with knowledge about the implications on assessment operations represents an invisibility of the complexity of the assessment operation, and a blind spot in HEI's understanding of how their operations inter-connect and where critical knowledge rests. I make this suggestion based on several factors.

First, as I have shown above, senior administration managers appeared more involved in academic decisions than operational managers, suggesting there is a recognised need for senior administrative knowledge but not necessarily the same recognition for operational knowledge. Second, administration managers were included in changes to academic matters when regulatory knowledge was required, yet not to consider the operational implications of academic changes (Hayley, Louise, Sarah), suggesting some administrative knowledge was perceived to be more valuable than others. Third, there were some differences in inclusion between HEI suggesting those HEI that have a better awareness of their internal workings may be more inclusive in their decision-making process. For example, at Esther's HEI, where technology had become integral to assessment practice, Esther was included in decisions on wide-ranging problems. The smaller HEI (David, Kirsty, Louise, Peter) also appeared to include operational considerations in their decision-making activities more, perhaps because they had centralised administrative units which could make the work more visible.

While there was an invisibility of operational aspects of making academic changes, there was also evidence to suggest that the realities of academic practice were not wholly understood when institution-wide decisions were made. There were several examples of large-scale changes projects that had made incorrect assumptions about how day to day academic tasks operated, particularly how assessment was set, and how marking operated, which caused projects to be delayed in their implementation (Brian, Carol, George, Janet).

Section summary: administrative influence in academic change

Administrators were contributing to solving academic problems, typically through initiating changes or implementing changes. They were often drawing on multiple forms of knowledge to recognise the need for change or to implement change, which suggests a more complex contribution to their HEI than is suggested by Whitchurch's bounded professionals. However, the most significant finding emerging from administrator contributions to academic change is that administrative contributions illustrate that the delivery of assessment has become more complex, and many decisions about academic strategy or a discrete part of academic practice, can actually have implications for other parts of the assessment operation, and in order to deliver changes well, it is important for those making the decisions to have a full awareness of the operational implications when making a decision. This is an important finding for HEI in the delivery of change.

Explaining administrative influence – mobilisation of knowledge

In Chapter 4, I reported that administrative knowledge supporting assessment could be process-related, technical, regulatory, student-related, institutional or a combination of these. Through this chapter I have shown how administrators are mobilising these knowledge forms to contribute to assessment decisions. In this section I summarise the claims that can be made about administrative knowledge and its relation to the influence and authority that administrators have based on these findings.

The first claim relates to the diversity of knowledge required to make good decisions about assessment in a complex environment. It was clear that these diverse forms of knowledge were now held by and mobilised by administrators to positively shape decisions about assessment.

The second claim relates to the influential ways that administrators mobilised knowledge. Administrators were interpreting and translating existing knowledge frameworks to guide administrators, students and academics. It is important that administrators contributed to solving complex regulatory problems as experts, as this suggests that regulatory knowledge has become more critical to a swathe of assessment decisions. It is also significant that administrators were initiating, facilitating and implementing academic changes, using their process, regulatory, student and technical knowledge to do so. I claim that these contributions signal academic administration managers may have a wider sphere of influence than previously understood when positioned as bounded professionals.

The third claim relates to the value of different forms of knowledge. Administrative influence over assessment was most visible when administrators were either mobilising regulatory knowledge, or multiple forms of knowledge. These findings suggest regulatory knowledge and the interconnections of knowledge have become more valuable in assessment decisions. The latter represents intersections of knowledge, which Whitchurch (2008) had predicted would come to be more important to cross-boundary professionals and give legitimacy to more influential forms of engagement.

The fourth claim is that administrators maintained a clear perception of the boundary of how they could use their knowledge to ultimately take decisions themselves. When administrators took decisions, they did so either based on process knowledge, technical knowledge, regulatory knowledge or a combination of these. Often, administrators only took decisions based on regulatory knowledge when the authority to do so had been formally delegated to them. Administrators were mobilising their knowledge to influence matters that were previously considered wholly academic and areas such as strategy, policy and regulation which shape the everyday experience of academics, students and administrators. However, there was a strong regard and respect for the boundary of academic authority. When administrators-initiated change to practice that spanned process and procedure, they showed an awareness of the limits of their 'sphere' of decision-making. Where administrators demonstrated influence over the decisions that academics took, by guiding the act of inference, or through providing an expert recommendation, there was a clear perception that academics, or academic committees, had the ultimate authority over decisions.

These findings suggest that the influence administrators have over assessment does not support claims that administrators are seeking more authority over academic matters, instead,

they indicate that administrators now hold knowledge that is critical to delivering assessment in a complex and highly regulated environment. What then became critical during my research, was to understand why it is that administrators hold these new and diverse forms of knowledge, rather than academics. It is this issue that I explore in the final empirical chapter.

Conclusion: administrative influence for complex operations and compliance

Through this chapter I have reported my findings about how administrators were involved in assessment decisions and what their contributions reveal about administrative influence and authority over assessment. I have also signalled how these findings support or challenge existing perceptions in the research literature that academic administration managers are bounded professionals, mobilising discrete forms of knowledge to influence only their functional area of responsibility.

There was strong evidence of administrative influence for operational work tasks and problems, that have become more complex. Administrators were mobilising all forms of administrative knowledge to take everyday decisions that were perceived to firmly rest within an operational boundary. They were managing the knowledge of administrators, academics and students in relation to processes and technology for everyday tasks. Furthermore, administration managers had considerable authority to change operational tasks, taking decisions to introduce technology, configure it, change administrative workforce responsibilities and taking operational decisions required to implement academic decisions.

There was strong evidence that administrators were developing and mobilising regulatory knowledge and expertise in assessment. There were examples of decision-making for everyday tasks based on regulatory expertise, and of decisions taken based on applying procedural rules. Administrators were developing the regulatory knowledge of administrators and academics to enable everyday decisions to be taken; this included identifying areas for regulatory change, facilitating regulatory change and implementing regulatory change through systems, processes and knowledge development. However, administrators were clear that they did not take decisions about regulatory frameworks; such decisions rested firmly with academic governance groups or senior academics. It is for this reason that I do not claim administrative ownership of regulatory assessment work, and instead define their influence as expert advice.

The evidence of administrative engagement in academic matters clearly positioned administrators in a supportive role, nevertheless, I claim that that nature of that support was strategic. This is because there were examples of administrators identifying the need for change to solve academic problems, initiating changes to everyday academic assessment practices. Furthermore, administrators were mobilising their operational and regulatory knowledge to provide advice on the implementation of academic change and were subsequently responsible for operationalising changes. These findings show the inter-connections between different parts of an HEI assessment operation and challenges when these interconnections are not understood, which represents an institutional blind spot in their operations.

These findings suggest academic administration managers may be better positioned as cross-boundary professionals, reflecting an evolution in their work. I have argued that administrators had influence over assessment because they held and mobilised knowledge that is now important for everyday decisions or change decisions in assessment. I have argued that their influence was most visible in areas that required administrators to mobilise multiple forms of non-academic knowledge, or regulatory knowledge, and suggested that this is because these forms of knowledge have become more valuable because of the forces described in Chapter 4. However, the findings reported in the last two chapters alone, have not dealt with explaining why it is that administrators have come to be the workers that hold and mobilise this knowledge. It is this issue that I now turn to in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6
Explaining changes in the control of assessment work

Introduction

In Chapter 4 I reported thematic findings that represent my application and adaption of Abbott's theory to the context of assessment administration:

- Environmental forces have been identified that are external (regulatory & student body) and internal forces (strategy, frameworks, technology, change)
- These forces are reshaping the qualities of assessment administration (scale, technical, student-centred, regulated, complex)
- These forces are creating new problems (operational, regulatory, academic)
- The forces are re-shaping administrative knowledge (process, technical, regulatory, student-related, institutional)

In Chapter 5 I reported my definition of administrative influence and authority, developed from an adaption of Abbott's concept of jurisdiction and my findings about the influence and authority that administrators have over assessment. I suggested that administrative influence can be claimed by understanding how administrators contribute to decisions, interpret and translate existing knowledge frameworks, and contribute to strategic decisions that structure work and knowledge. I characterised administrative influence over assessment in three ways: operational authority; expert regulatory advice; strategic academic support.

Through these two preceding chapters I have argued that the assessment environment has become more complex, regulated and uncertain, and now requires more diverse forms of knowledge to deliver assessment activities and to solve emerging problems. I have argued that administrators hold and mobilise these diverse forms of knowledge, which has resulted in more influential forms of administrative contributions to assessment. However, administrators have retained a clear perception of a boundary to their authority,

In this final empirical chapter I build on the findings surfaced in Chapters 4 and 5, to examine why it is that administrators, rather than academics, were acquiring and mobilising these more diverse forms of knowledge, why there were variations in administrative influence

between assessment areas, and why there has not been significant changes in the authority of administrators in assessment matters despite their more influential contributions.

I adopt Abbott's concept of vacant or contested areas of control to explore the engagement or disengagement, of academic and administrative workers in the changing work tasks, knowledge and problem-solving. In a contest model, two groups of workers each seek to stake their claim on the work, through the ability to take decisions and the ability to shape the work. In a vacancy model, a new area of work emerges, or a group of workers disengage, which leaves the control of that area ready for another group to claim. The previous chapters have reported themes based on analysis of the whole data set, and in this chapter, I move the analysis to a narrower focus on three specialist areas of assessment administration: examination administration, student casework administration, and exam board administration. These three areas were selected because they represented the areas with the most in-depth discussion, with insight from multiple participants, and because I will show that they illustrate different changes in the control of work.

For Abbott, the important story to be told is the story of changes in the control of work, and therefore in the pages that follow I tell the story of changes in control of each area assessment administration in turn, describing how the forces have reshaped the central tasks, reshaped knowledge and created problems. I describe the engagement of academics and administrators and characterise the changes in the control of work as either the result of a vacant or contested area of control. I conclude by drawing together the themes arising from these stories.

The story of change in examinations

In this section I illustrate changes in the control of examinations work, which I define as tasks associated with formal examinations such as examination scheduling; examination invigilation; examination logistics; examination policy; and putting in place reasonable adjustments for students in examinations. I draw on my analysis of 42 decisions surfaced by administration managers about the delivery of examinations, and their accounts of changes in administrative work. The data was drawn from nine of the thirteen interviews, comprising the perspective of operational examination managers (Hayley, Louise, Michelle), of senior administration managers who oversee operational examinations managers (Janet, Peter,

Carol, Kirsty) and of administration managers who have an interest in the examination activity for their related areas work (Anna, Sarah).

I show that examination administration has been subject to a process of increasing operational complexity and gradual academic disengagement in its central tasks. This has resulted in administrative decision-making on a vast scale as part of their routine work, where they develop and maintain knowledge of examination invigilators and students about examination protocols, and they carry out tasks that had previously been the purview of academics. I suggest that the knowledge required to deliver examinations administration has become more complex, comprising process, regulatory, technical knowledge and practical knowledge about the student experience of assessment. While there was a strong sense of administrative ownership for the examination's operation, there was a clearly perceived boundary to administrative decision-making authority.

Complex examinations operations

In response to larger number of students, and the continued persistence of traditional written examinations, the delivery of formal examinations was now described as a major operation:

> *"So we had usually in the region of about 800 or so separate examinations over many sites, with students from many different [academic departments] sitting those and, to give you a sense of the scale, I think we used to quote about 56,000-58,000 sittings, so, bums on seats […]so it's a large operation"* (Hayley)

Its emergence as a major operation had put gradual pressure on the operational delivery of examinations:

> *"We used to have two ladies who would saunter back and forth between the one exam venue, with absence lists, hand-written absence lists. Now it's a major operation and we have a central hub that is manned by two people, at any one time, so if there is a mistake in a paper [at another venue or campus] everybody knows about it within 5 minutes at every venue…So, we might have a [module] that is 100 people strong, but there are 2 people doing it with extra time over there, 3 people doing it in some other circumstance, you know a couple of people here, somebody has fainted, the ambulance has been called – all of that – is all centrally monitored and recorded."* (Hayley)

In delivering this major operation, administration managers demonstrated a continuous improvement approach (Hayley, Michelle, Louise, Janet), such as holding a review after each session to discuss "*what we could do to try and influence you know how it could run better next time"* (Hayley). The need for this continual review was attributed explicitly to the scale of the operation:

> *"So we've been having to deal with far larger volumes, and its forced us to look at our processes and procedures and make them as simple and as slick as possible, simply because the students going through are so much larger."* (Hayley).

Administration managers provided numerous examples of incremental changes they introduced to improve operations, including how examination papers were prepared (Janet, Hayley, Louise, Michelle), where examinations took place (Janet, Michelle), and who manages the examination room (Janet, Hayley, Michelle, Peter, Sarah). Administration managers took many of these improvement decisions themselves and were influential in initiating, facilitating, and implementing procedural changes that academic bodies authorised which were discussed in Chapter 5.

Re-shaping examination tasks and knowledge – complex operations

Examination delivery was becoming more operationally complex, and this was changing the qualities of core tasks and knowledge, which I illustrate through the example of examination scheduling. The core tasks of examination scheduling involved collating data, checking data, using technology, applying procedural rules to construct a timetable, and communicating that timetable to staff and students. Over time, scheduling had evolved to require operational, procedural and technical knowledge, as well as a concern for the student experience of the examination process.

Now that examination was a major operation, the scheduling activity was more complex. Larger student numbers meant that there were more students to fit into examination rooms: *"We have enormous [modules], of say up to 500 people […]; we don't have a room that will seat 500 so we have to schedule over multiple rooms"* (Hayley). Flexible academic curriculums that enabled students to take modules across disciplines meant there were more restrictions on when an examination could take place to avoid creating a clash for students: *"the politics modules are the worst to schedule because it has to fit in with probably, upwards of 500 other modules"* (Hayley). More students required reasonable adjustments to

their examinations such as having additional time, having an individual examination room or the use of a computer, added further restrictions to scheduling. Scheduling had further complexities when HEI policies set limits on how many examinations a student can sit within one day or over multiple days (Hayley). These elements combined, and created problems when they conflicted; for example, creating an unavoidable clash in a student's schedule. I found that administration managers used their experience and knowledge to interpret these situations and take a judgement on how best to resolve the problem, having the student experience of assessment at the forefront of their mind (Hayley, Janet, Michelle).

Factoring these numerous requirements into scheduling activity created a level of complexity that created new problems. Administration managers took decisions to find efficiencies through technology, for example, holding more data about examination requirements within the student record system (Michelle) or introducing scheduling software (Hayley). Utilising scheduling software enabled technology to make complex decisions that were previously taken by administrators:

> *"Exam scheduling, used to be done by hand. We ditched that and we let the software do its stuff, we plug everything in that we need to and then we let it do its stuff [it] will make the best of the rules that we put it in [and finds] a way of managing everything that we need."* (Hayley)

These decisions to introduce technology, taken by administration managers, changed the qualities of the core tasks as they introduced the need for technical knowledge to maintain the systems; this new technical knowledge was acquired and maintained by administrators.

Some new problems arose that needed strategic decisions to resolve, for example, there was a lack of suitable examination space on campus to support the major operation (Janet, Michelle). Administration managers were identifying these problems, initiating a decision to change practice, exploring solutions, and making recommendations for a major change to delivery. At Janet's HEI, the decision to move examinations off campus was taken by an administration manager, and considered an operational decision based on finances and logistics. In contrast, at Michelle's HEI the decision required prioritising the use of campus space for examinations over teaching, and therefore had wider implications than purely operations, and was taken by a senior academic leader.

This description of changes in scheduling work is illustrative of themes that were visible in the wider data about examinations work; it had become more operationally complex, technology was being used to respond to the emerging complexity, and this was reshaping the nature of the work and knowledge. Administrators were taking operational decisions, and making recommendations on complex problems that had implications wider than the operational sphere.

Changing the division of labour: examination invigilation

There had been a gradual change in the division of labour for the management of examinations, from academics to administrators, which I illustrate through the example of examination invigilation. The core tasks of examination invigilation involved identifying invigilation requirements, sourcing, training, allocating invigilators to examinations, and managing the examination room. Over time, academic knowledge about what is permissible in examination rooms had become enshrined in regulations and assimilated by administrators who became expert in its practical application. Concurrently, non-academic knowledge in the form of process, technical, regulatory and student-related knowledge become more critical to the complex tasks of managing the invigilation workforce.

The delivery of the major examination's operation, which was often spread across multiple venues, required a larger invigilator workforce. Administration managers now managed an *"army of invigilators"* (Hayley), with 130-150 registered invigilators at large HEI (Hayley, Michelle) and 75 at a small HEI (Peter). Managing the invigilator pool had become more complex to account for specialist invigilation needs to support students with reasonable adjustments (illustrated in Chapter 4).

The nature of invigilation work itself had evolved, adapting to changes in how academics designed their in-person assessments. Louise provided a detailed commentary on these shifts:

> *"I think exam setup, invigilation has changed hugely in 10 years, because technology has changed, the way that assessments within modules has changed […] there are some professional requirements for assessments […] sighted exam […] open book exam."* (Louise)

Louise was proactive in trying to understand the impact of new assessment methods, giving examples of questions she asked so that she could adapt and manage invigilation: *"if you're*

saying it's open book exam, are we saying one book? Are we saying this book specifically? How is that allowed to be annotated?" (Louise). Similarly, with the development of personal technologies, new problems emerged that required management:

> "*Can a student use a phone as a calculator? [...] smartwatches, phones [...] is it appropriate to say, 'Turn it off and leave it in your bag,' but then we're not going to provide security for the bags? The value of things like phones and smartwatches has gone up incredibly, so what is the responsibility of the university to be able to protect those belongings?"* (Louise)

Louise and Hayley (discussed in Chapter 5) initiated changes to examination policy to solve new problems arising from student technologies, using their practical experience to ensure the integrity of the examination room: "r*eacting to those developments as soon as possible, because you never want to be on the back end of it because you found out that that's how someone's been cheating."* (Louise)

Administration managers clearly positioned the act of invigilation as an administrative responsibility, rather than an academic one, managing the knowledge of the invigilation workforce (Hayley, Janet, Louise, Michelle). This represents a change in the division of labour over time, where traditionally, examination invigilation was an academic task. Hayley explained this transition:

> *"We used to have academics as Chief Invigilators so they used to sit at the front on a raised platform for 3 hours, and do marking or whatever, but it was just for show really, they didn't know, they wouldn't know what to do if something happened. So we relieved them of that duty. [Now] we employ professional invigilators [...] properly trained, trained every year, and they tend to come back, come back and come back, so that they know what to do in certain situations, and you know they're relied upon*." (Hayley)

When I asked, Hayley said that this change in responsibilities had not been contentious: *"No. No they all hated doing it, so they were very relieved."* (Hayley). This view was shared by Sarah, who suggested academics did not take the role of invigilation seriously, and often did not turn up: *"I came very close to cancelling an exam because I didn't have enough invigilators in the room because three academics had not turned up to invigilate."* (Sarah). The move to professional invigilators rather than academic was perceived to deliver an

invigilation workforce that could be relied upon as they were equipped with key knowledge, that was practical and procedural, to manage the examination.

This description of changes in examination invigilation was the strongest example of changes in the authority of administrators, where academic tasks had gradually become administrative tasks. I have suggested this was because the work and the knowledge required to do the work was changing, and non-academic knowledge had become more critical. However, this example also suggests there was an element of academic disengagement from examination work, which I will now discuss further.

Invisibility of the examination's operation

The operational influence and authority that administration managers had over examinations and the changes in the division of can be explained by the increased complexity of the work, the need for practical, operational, and technical knowledge to manage and invigilate examinations and a proactiveness on the part of administration managers to take ownership of the examination's activity, addressing on-the-ground challenges. This shift appeared to be uncontentious with academics and below I explore why.

There was a shared sense from administration managers that the scale of administrative work that goes into supporting examinations was invisible. Administration managers described lengthy preparations to deliver large-scale examinations, requiring engagement from academics, departmental administrators, and central administrators, involving *"back and forth"* (Michelle) between different workers. The work was *"labour-intensive"* and sometimes *"frantic"* (Hayley, Michelle) and the administrative effort required to deliver examinations appeared to not be widely understood, particularly by academics:

> *"In terms of the logistics of running examinations, we had a very slick operation, however, like lots of slick operations, it relied on other people supplying what you needed in order to be able to do that. And I think, quite simply, the biggest obstacle was getting other people to realise the importance of what you were doing. And also, realising the importance of you're doing that at the time you need to do it."* (Hayley)

> *"Yeah, so the expectation from the academic community as whole was - it doesn't matter if the exam paper is with the [examinations team] three weeks before or three hours before."* (Michelle)

There was a sense that academics did not understand the scale or impact that their actions could have on the student experience of examinations. This was evident in the discussions of preparing examination papers, a core academic product of the assessment process. Administrative teams would review each examination paper, checking for inconsistencies, clarity, typographical errors, and effectively "*proofread"* documents, *"in so far as a lay person can"* (Hayley), focusing on accuracy and consistency:

> "*So things like, if it says there are 10 questions, making sure there are 10 questions. Making sure that the questions read in reasonable English, that there is a section A and a section B, and that anything that is supposed to be there, is there."* (Hayley)

A large administrative effort to support exam papers had arisen to try to improve the quality of examination papers for students. Errors were not unusual, with administration managers having processes in place to respond to errors during the examination:

> *"We ask them to give us contact details, where they're going to be when the exam – but there's a question on the paper, sometimes we struggle to get hold of the academic to clarify, or sometimes it just takes a little bit of time so students kind of get restless."* (Michelle)

> *"People would send in papers as finished products, and then come back and say 'actually we've changed this' or 'can we change this question', 'can we update something', 'we've forgotten something', or 'we've discovered an error'. And as far as possible we would try and accommodate that and re-print it rather than giving erratum sheets, because that just gets rather complicated."* (Hayley)

Based on their experience, Hayley's team tried to influence the academic examination paper preparation through developing guidance:

> *"So, we as an administrative team, we would get the papers in, we would issue lots of instructions about how you check, what you check, based on the sorts of issues we have come across in previous years. And we encouraged the practice for the [academic lead] to check the final version of the paper"* (Hayley)

Anna explained that at her previous HEI senior management had taken action to try to address the number of examination paper errors:

> *"Exam errors used to be a big issue for [my previous HEI] but the [senior management team] gave a sort of proclamation that said actually, 'there are so many errors happening, this is the new procedure you need to go through' which included a whole other checking process, re-checking on the questions."* (Anna)

I suggest that elements of academic disengagement have increased the engagement of administrators in traditionally academic activities, as seen in the work of examination papers, and disengagement on a larger scale can lead to changes in the division of labour, as seen in invigilation work. Some of this disengagement could be explained by the invisibility of administrative work and administrative needs.

As well as the operational examples above, at the strategic level, administrative issues in examinations were not always visible, or not prioritised. Hayley and Michelle both described examples of raising operational issues and challenges to academic groups that they thought were not heard. Michelle raised operational challenges about her HEI's decision to change the academic calendar because the change brought some examinations earlier in the academic year increasing the administrative workload. While Michelle recognised the strategic driver for the different timing of examinations, which was to support retention, her concerns about administrative resource were not addressed.

Hayley raised concerns about the increasing number of reasonable adjustments, that she thought would soon "*break down"*, but felt that the concerns were not acknowledged:

> *"It's reported at the end of the exam season when a report on the exams goes to the central bodies. But it is, like all committees, its academically-led, and if we highlight issues like this, it takes a lot of convincing that it really is an issue. Because academics don't see that logistic complexity really."* (Hayley)

Hayley was not alone in raising concern over the sustainability of the special arrangement's operation, which was also reported as challenge by Janet and Peter.

I characterise changes in examination administration as reflecting a vacancy model, where academics have gradually disengaged because the work has become further and further away from the area of academic expertise. I represent this visually in Figure 3, where examinations work has strong connections to the student body, HEI frameworks and HEI technology. The gradual academic disengagement has meant that increased administrative authority of the

examination operation has not been perceived as a threat to academic authority, as that authority has already been relinquished. As such, many changes are happening in a space that is perceived to be an administrative space. This has consolidated administrative authority over operational matters; however, it risks their work becoming invisible, and the pressures on the examination operation being seen as separate to the bigger issues of how assessment should be delivered.

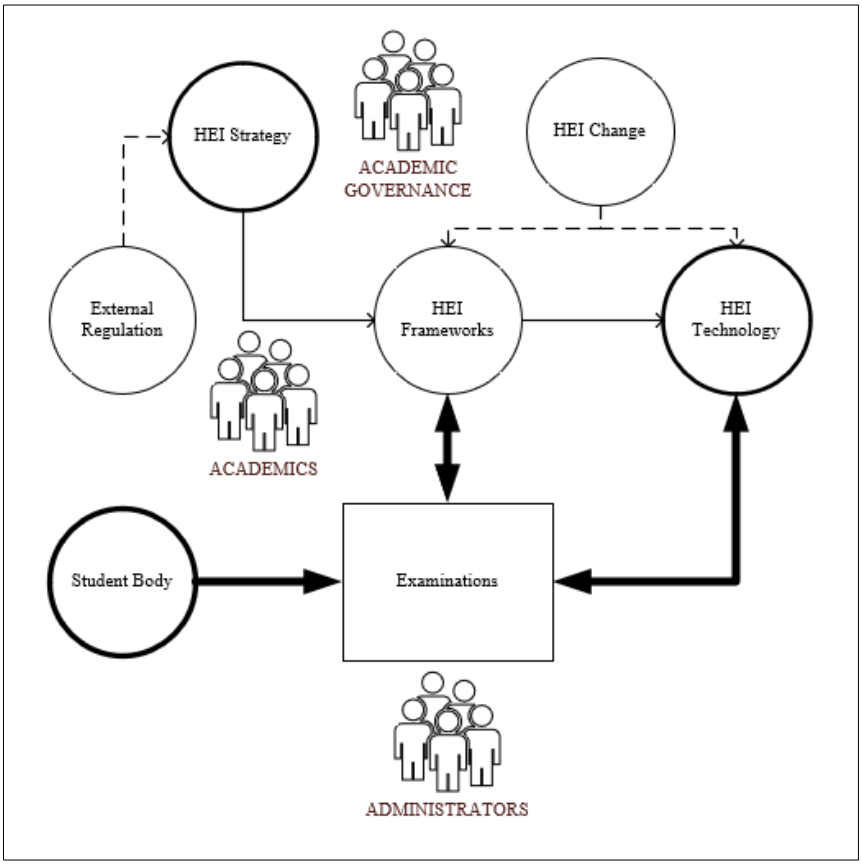

Figure 3: Practical experience of an invisible examination operation

Summary of examinations administration: invisible administrative work?

The area of examinations administration was the only area of work where there was consistent, and frequent, administrative decision-making, which I suggest is because the work is largely operational and process oriented. The processes and operations have been impacted by a more operationally complex environment that has a larger and more diverse student body. The work is also made more complex by the nature of academic provision, and its operationally complexity has made non-academic knowledge more important; process, procedural, technical, practical, and student-related knowledge.

Examinations administration, and its growing complexity lacked visibility outside the administrative team responsible for its delivery. While administration managers were proactively identifying problems and taking decisions to deliver improvements that were within their perceived decision-making remit, this is potentially problematic as the root cause of the problem may not be operational and may not be addressed. The invisibility of examinations administration represents what Rhoades (2010) has referred to as a blind spot in how HEI are managing their organisations.

The story of change in student casework

In this section I illustrate changes in the control of student casework, which I define as tasks that enable decisions about individual students in unusual circumstances, including decisions about academic misconduct, academic appeals, extenuating circumstances, and a combination of these. I draw on my analysis of 63 decisions related to student cases; 38 of which related to decisions about individual students, six of which were complex, and 25 examples of changes to how student casework operates. The data was drawn from twelve of the thirteen interviews[11], however, I quote Anna's transcript heavily, as the only senior student casework manager part of this research.

Student casework is an area traditionally deemed to be an area of academic authority. I show that student casework has been subject to increased regulation because of external and internal regulation and societal student changes. This has resulted in administrative involvement in developing the knowledge of academic decision-makers, supporting them with the act of inference. It has also resulted in the formal delegation of some everyday decisions from academics to administrators. I suggest that the knowledge required to deliver student casework has become increasingly regulatory and that regulatory knowledge has increased in value. While administrators have developed regulatory expertise that is important for making decisions, there remained a clear respect for academic authority over making individual decisions and the decision-making framework.

Re-shaping the central tasks of student casework – standardisation

In response to increased external regulation, and student expectations, student casework practices have become more standardised. I describe the core tasks, their purpose, and the

[11] There were no examples from Michelle, whose account focused on other areas of assessment work.

effects of external agencies reshaping the work tasks and increasing the value of external regulatory knowledge.

Student casework typically involves a student (or in the case of academic misconduct – an academic) identifying a potential problem that requires a judgement to be made. The most routine of these decisions arise from students who encounter difficulties in completing their assessment and make a request for extenuating circumstances or a deadline extension. Other casework arises from a student making a complaint or academic appeal to challenge a decision already made by the HEI about their assessment or arising from an expectation that a student has plagiarised or committed another type of misconduct in completing their assessment. All HEIs have procedural frameworks that set out how student casework should operate.

Student casework was perceived as closely tied to the delivery of fair, transparent, and compliant assessment processes *"to ensure that, well, assessment takes place consistently and fairly, so that students receive results that they deserve"* (Anna); a view echoed by others (Anna, David, Janet, Kirsty, Peter). Such language was reflective of external frameworks which required HEIs to have "fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeal which are accessible to all students" and assessment process that are "reliable, consistent, fair and valid", "inclusive and equitable" (QAA, 2018, p3).

The involvement of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) in student casework, and their continued publication of guidance was widely recognised as a trigger for changes to internal frameworks, aligning practice and introducing additional work tasks to monitor compliance. Anna explains that the current OIA frameworks require more active alignment by HEIs than in the past:

> *"The OIA – which I think is a good thing by the way – coming in has really changed things. Initially in terms of ensuring that universities even abided by their own procedures in a more transparent way, providing reasons for their decisions, that sort of thing. I mean it's got to the stage now where I think we're reaching a cusp of the OIA being clear that they're not prescriptive, but at the same time requiring more and more similar procedures from universities. So, it really has required the professionalisation of people within our role."* (Anna)

Anna alludes to the impact external regulation has had on the knowledge required by administration managers, which I return to in the next section. The alignment of HEIs' internal frameworks to external guidance, has made those frameworks more consistent across the sector, seen in Anna's reflection of her current and previous HEI's frameworks:

> *"They don't use similar language, I mean if you read them it's not the same procedures, but [...] the students submit a case, they have 28 days from exam results to submit, they report on finite grounds, we consider whether they're ineligible or not […], we then get a response from the [department], which we normally give 2 weeks for them to get, then the single [academic officer] considers that complaint, and then the student has a review stage. I mean in a way, as the OIA guidance has come in, it's sort of difficult to do anything else, except that you could have different, very different decision-making panels."* (Anna)

In Chapter 4 I reported Peter's observation that student casework was increasing because of the OIA's presence, the larger student body accessing support procedures, and a perceived reluctance by students to accept outcomes. These combined forces were impacting the central tasks of extenuating circumstances, where three changes were observed. First, in a similar way to academic appeals, HEIs were making changes to their internal frameworks, standardising rules, to bring about more consistent decision-making for large numbers of students (George, Janet, Louise, Peter, Sarah). Janet explained the introduction of standardised procedures within her HEI:

> *"There was nothing in the academic regulations about granting a student an extension to their deadline, that happened within the [departments], there was no visibility above the level of that department […] so there was no standard way of knowing who's getting an extension or for what or knowing if there's a pattern that affects the student's whole studies, whether it's just one module. […] And now, there is a standard process which says who is able to grant extensions and in what circumstances […] there is a kind of infrastructure behind it and there's reporting of numbers and things that comes back to [an academic committee]. So, we have more understanding of who's getting extensions and in what circumstances."* (Janet)

The OIA has recently published a new part of the Good Practice Framework on extenuating circumstances (OIA, 2020) which may bring about further change within HEIs to align practices with that framework.

A second change was emerging in the qualities of extenuating circumstances tasks through introducing technology. Only Esther's HEI had delivered technical processes to support student casework, by introducing an online system for student extension requests, but there was ambition to deliver these sorts of services to students from others (David, Janet, Kirsty). Additionally, this is an area that HEIs, including my own, have been forced to make electronic more rapidly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic which increased off-campus working by students and staff, making previous processes less accessible and less efficient. The third change observed was that new divisions of labour, or rather, changes in decision-making authority were appearing, discussed in the next section.

Changing the division of labour in student casework decisions

The division of labour for everyday decisions in student casework reflected the traditional academic authority over this area of work. Administrators typically[12] mobilised knowledge of process and procedures to support and guide academics in their decision-making process, and sometimes as delegated decision-makers.

In a supportive role, administrators prepared case files, collated information, and made sure student casework processes ran smoothly (Anna, Carol, George, Louise, Peter), mobilising knowledge of the procedures to help the decision-making:

> *"[My role is] to present the applications in a kind of standard format, so it tends to be a summarised version of the application, what the evidence is, the dates of the evidence, and any particular notes to that student, so that they're already retaking, that they've been suspended for two years, whatever it might be, whatever is pertinent."* (Louise)

Administrators also served as guides, informally equipping academic decision-makers with the relevant procedural and process knowledge to make decisions about academic

[12] Administrators were supporters or guides in 24 out of 30 examples of everyday decisions about student casework

misconduct, assessment appeals, student discipline and extenuating circumstances. Anna explained:

> "*So they [academics] will come in without any [knowledge of the procedures] – they might have the knowledge because they've been an examiner before, but they might never have seen how the meeting works in terms of bringing a student to a meeting with their [academic tutor], the kinds of questions they might want to ask during that meeting, and then the decisions that they make at the end – either whether it's the case that there's been more inaccurate referencing or some very minor things that actually education can entirely address, and in which case then they can apply a marking scheme which doesn't take into account the work that they have issue with; or its more serious then it is referred to us [for formal investigation]. But on making that distinction, that's the kind of thing that we can provide them with guidance based on other cases that we're aware of. So it's their decision, but we support them. And if they're trying to make a decision that would be entirely inconsistent or not permissible, we would nicely support them to perhaps make a different decision as well. But that's very rare."* (Anna)

Administrators provided guidance because they held more detailed knowledge of the relevant frameworks, having developed a form of expertise by working on a large volumes of cases, whereas academics may only be involved in a few cases, or their responsibilities may change every year (Anna, Brian).

There were new divisions of labour emerging, where administrators took decisions, formally delegated to them, by applying a set of limited procedural criteria[13]. Such delegated decisions included student extenuating circumstances outcomes (Carol) and assessment appeal eligibility (Anna, Kirsty). For these decisions, administrative teams reviewed requests from students, assessed the request against a set of criteria and decided on the next steps. Administrators determined if a student request for an appeal was *"ineligible"* (Anna) based on procedural rules, or if there were *"no grounds"* (Kirsty) on which to investigate. For example, appeal procedures may set out that a student must submit their appeal within a defined period after receiving their results; administrators could review a request and

[13] Administrators were delegated decision-makers for 6 out of the 30 examples of everyday decisions about student casework

determine it could not be investigated if it was submitted after the period set out in the procedures.

Administrators at Carol's institution determined if a student's request for a later attempt at assessment could be granted, they would "*make the straightforward decisions – yes you meet policy"* (Carol). Carol had a clear understanding of when administrators could and could not take decisions, referring a decision to a panel if: *"their situation was unusual and there was no criteria for it"* (Carol). For example, Carol explained that if a student had medical evidence that covered the assessment period, the student would meet criteria set out in the procedures and the administrative team would take the decision; but it was more complex if medical evidence did not cover the assessment period and would be referred to the academic panel.

The reasons for decisions being delegated to administrators by academics was not made explicit by the administration managers but can be inferred from drawing on the emerging picture of the changes in student casework. Delegation was partly the result of the larger number of decisions needed, which reached thousands each year for extenuating circumstances (Carol), a desire to have quicker decisions for students, and a form of unburdening of academics. I inferred this from Anna's description of a recent change from a labour-intensive and slow process:

> *"Before, three academics got together to make any decision, including whether or not it was ineligible. So now, [case administrators] consider whether the complaint or appeal is eligible in the first instance."* (Anna)

Administrators took these decisions based on applying clear procedural rules and they represent what Abbott calls 'routinisation'; where the expertise of one group of workers can be codified and delegated to a group of workers with knowledge to make discrete decisions. These decisions were being delegated when there were many decisions to be taken, when there was a desire for more consistency, and when there was a need for compliance with established rules. The administrator's authority was formally delegated through procedures, agreed by an academic governing body, and therefore had clear 'regulatory' boundaries. This form of decision-making has the potential to unburden academics without challenging academic authority, ensuring academic time is focused on the more complex decisions that

require academic knowledge to solve. As such, it could be adopted more widely in student casework.

Administrative expertise for complex problems in student casework

Authority for everyday decisions in student casework rested firmly with academics, although administrators were becoming increasingly involved informally through providing guidance or taking delegated decisions. Interestingly, when complex problems arose in student casework, administration managers became more critical to decision-making; they were identifying problems, engaging in the act of inference to reason about solutions and typically making a formal recommendation on a course of action.

I provided data from the research interviews in Chapter 5 to show the influential ways that administration managers contributed to procedural problems and procedural change, so here, I merely give an indication of the types of problems that arose in student casework. Complex procedural problems in student casework were common (Anna, David, Janet, Kirsty, Peter, Sarah) and related to instances where a student was being investigated for academic misconduct at the same time as an appeal investigation was underway; very serious academic misconduct cases; complex appeals and complaints; instances where the resolution requires a regulation to be set aside. These complex matters had no clear outcome and required interpretation using knowledge of the regulatory procedures and understanding of the implications of decisions. There were also 16 examples of changes to HEI frameworks governing student casework examples that administration managers contributed to (Anna, David, Esther, George, Janet, Kirsty, Louise, Peter, Sarah). Administration managers were identifying the need for change based on their practical experience of applying the procedures, for example, initiating procedural change to clarify who can take decisions on extenuating circumstances (Janet), delegating initial investigations to administrative workers (Anna), expanding the pool of workers who can review appeal outcomes (David). Administration managers were facilitating consultation on large-scale changes (Anna, David, Kirsty, Peter) and crafting revised procedural documents (Anna, Louise, Peter).

In the next section I offer an explanation for their prevalence in student casework.

Expansion and consolidation of regulatory knowledge

The existence of administrators providing guidance to academic decision-makers, and expert recommendations on solving procedural problems or change can be explained by the external forces which has created new knowledge in the form of new frameworks, that administrators have often acquired. Additionally, I suggest that the external forces have revalued regulatory knowledge.

The requisite knowledge to manage student casework has broadened, and become more specialist, requiring knowledge of the external frameworks of the OIA and the Equality Act (2010):

> *"Although you don't need any particular kind of background, in order for you to ensure that we're doing all the things that we have to, actually you have to have a background in the OIA…you know that could be training on the job…understanding the OIA, understanding what the sector thinks is appropriate, the equality act, sort of protected characteristics… (Charlotte: so a wider knowledge base that you have to acquire?)…Exactly. And a specific wider knowledge base."* (Anna)

This external regulatory knowledge was valued within HEIs for strategic decisions, evidenced in the expert contributions of administration managers to procedural change reported in the previous section. Anna explained the value placed on her own knowledge and experience by her current HEI who had delayed strategic changes to student casework procedures until she was in post to lead the change process, bringing knowledge of the OIA and experience from her previous role:

> *"I could reassure them that in my previous role this had worked, and absolutely that gave a lot of confidence as well. I think it was also the fact that they knew I was coming with experience of the OIA as well. There was quite limited knowledge of the OIA because, as I say, the person who was in the team before had gone somewhere else and so it left this sort of gap of knowledge within the institution – they knew they had to be aware of it, wary of it, but they didn't really know what it was or what it said, so I think that allowed me to come in and say 'look we need to do these bits because I think they'll work, And we need to do these bits because if we don't the OIA are going to say…you know, are going to uphold cases against us'".* (Anna)

Regulatory knowledge was also valued for decisions about individual students, evidenced by administrative engagement as experts in complex student matters, and as guides. Additionally, Anna demonstrated this regulatory knowledge was valued widely within her HEI because the advice of her team was often sought out by academics:

> *"I mean to be fair they tend to ask for our advice off the bat and say 'what should we do here?'. Only those that are more experienced tend to be more confident […] but I think nowadays, academics are much more aware of the risks of getting it wrong, and they're much more open to advice – at least at the stage we come in – from administrators. I know that's not always the way with some of my colleagues' sort of on the quality side of things. But by the time they get to us and there are issues, they're very open to [advice]…"* (Anna)

In Abbott's terms, existing regulatory knowledge about student casework has been assimilated by administrators through their experience of working on student casework. As new frameworks have emerged, new knowledge has been required which has typically been acquired by administrators rather than academics. Administration managers maintained a position as expert advisor to academic authorities in making changes to HEI frameworks, and only took decisions in a formally delegated capacity, with limited impact.

I characterise this evolution as reflecting a vacancy model (Figure 4), for slightly different reasons to those suggested for the evolution of examinations. For student casework, administrators were gaining knowledge and expertise because they were operating in the heart of the areas where there are significant changes taking place that require new knowledge to be developed and translated to their HEI internal practice. Academics appeared to be on the outside of where the changes were happening. Furthermore, changes in administrative influence and authority did not appear to be perceived as a challenge to academic authority; either because authority was being delegated within tight boundaries, because there could be value in unburdening academics by delegation some decisions, or because the risks of making the wrong decision outweigh the risks of excluding administrative expertise.

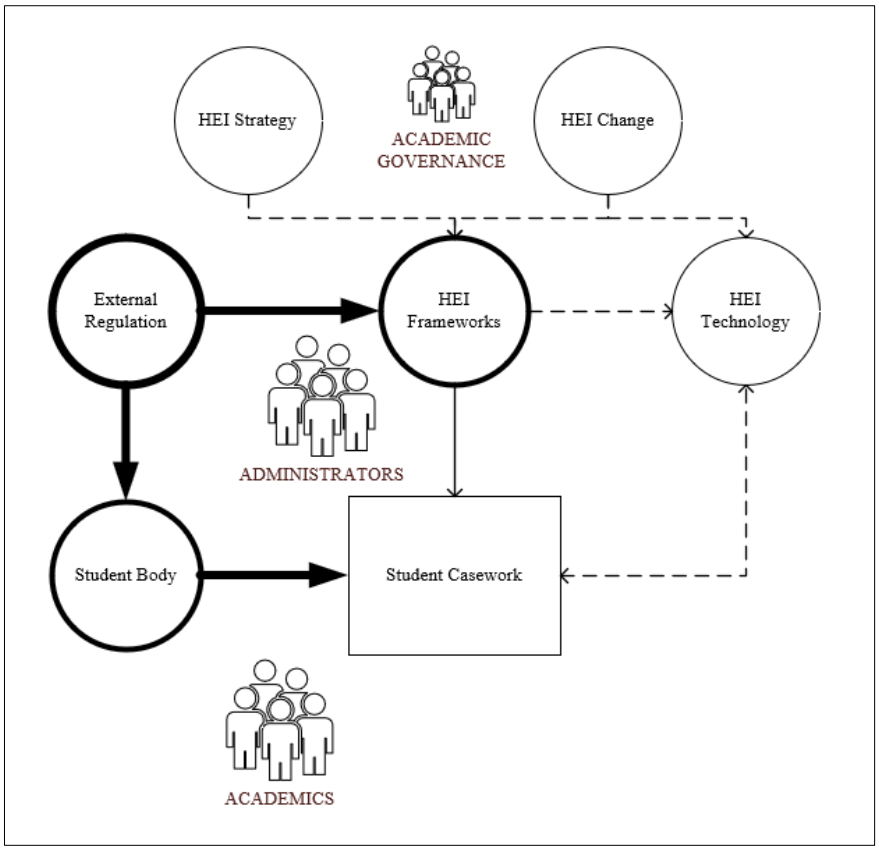

Figure 4: Expertise for regulated student casework

Summary of student casework: an opportunity to unburden academics?

The area of student casework illustrates an acknowledged and unchallenged increase in the involvement of administrators in decisions that were traditionally academic decisions. The work has become more procedurally complex, with external frameworks triggering HEI change and more standardised procedures. In some instances, the scale of the work has increased, and this has resulted in the routinisation of tasks, delegated to administrators. Importantly, decision-making authority still rested with academics, either individual academics or academic bodies who have delegated discrete decisions within prescribed boundaries, despite administrators having assimilated existing and new regulatory knowledge that has become important for student casework.

This illustration shows ways that administrators can become more involved in academic matters in a way that clearly retains academic decision-making authority through delegated decisions. In some ways, I was surprised that there were not more examples from student casework of delegated decisions; the areas of appeal investigation and extenuating

circumstances are both areas that could be designed in ways that enable decisions to be taken without academic knowledge. This could represent a different form of Rhoades (2010) blind spot in organisational management; there could be missed opportunities to structure assessment work in ways that could unburden academics from certain decision-making activities.

The story of change in exam boards

In this section I illustrate changes in the control of exam board work. An exam board is a decision-making body that formally agrees the outcomes of students' assessments, modules, progression to the next year or their award. In English HEIs these take different forms: they can be split into a hierarchy where different boards take different types of decisions, or they can be conflated into one board authorising all levels of decisions. Exam boards represent the final decisions of a suite of assessment-related decisions that are routinely taken about each student. Exam board decisions are therefore everyday decisions, that take place on a large-scale, but have complexity associated with them.

I define exam board tasks broadly, drawing on my analysis of 76 decisions that related to marking, mark entry, assessment regulations that impact marks or awards, and any work that dictates or shapes how or when and exam board takes place or who is involved. 28 of these decisions were everyday decisions, and 48 related to changes, such as changes to regulations, systems, operations surrounding the exam board activity. The examples were drawn from twelve interviews[14].

I show that exam board administration has been subject to multiple forces of change from the external and internal environment and the activity is in a state of flux. I show that exam board administration has become more operationally and technically complex. This has resulted in administrators assimilating regulatory knowledge to deliver operational and technical tasks and to provide guidance to academic decision-makers. However, this has not resulted in changes in the division of labour, and in fact, there appeared to be tensions in the administrative advisory role. I suggest that academic authority over exam board decisions has been steadily declining because of changes to assessment frameworks that have re-shaped the purpose of an exam board and increased the importance of regulatory knowledge. However,

[14] Anna, a senior student casework manager, did not provide examples of exam board-related decisions, but did provide insight into the exam board operation through her commentary on assessment appeals.

unlike in student casework, this evolution has been less explicit and as such, I suggest there is a need to re-establish the purpose of an exam board and administrative work connected to it.

Re-shaping the qualities of exam board work - scale and complexity

In this section I demonstrate that the process of making exam board decisions about students has become more complex. There are many similarities in the accounts of exam board administration with the accounts of examinations administration; however, unlike in the area of examinations, administrative decision-making authority had not expanded beyond administrative process.

With a larger student body, there are now more students requiring exam board decisions, often within tight timescales. I highlighted in Chapter 4 that HEI strategic decisions such as having multiple student intakes per academic year, or changing the structure of an academic year, made operations more complex, and this was affecting exam boards; they occurred more frequently, and sometimes took place alongside other core activities such as teaching. Exam boards also became more complex when the academic portfolio was expanded to include new types of provision such as partnerships and apprenticeships who might have different exam board structures and regulations governing decisions.

Exam boards can only take decisions if the assessment process has operated as expected, with complete and accurate assessment data presented to the board, which involved considerable administrative tasks in preparation. Administrators undertook extensive and robust checking, for completeness of data and compliance with the regulations (David, Hayley, Louise, Sarah): "*We exhaustively check the paperwork […] make sure that there are no errors in it.*" (David). To complete these checks administrators mobilised process and regulatory knowledge, ensuring marks reflected procedural rules such as penalties for late submission. These data checks were lengthier when systems could not automatically transfer assessment marks between a virtual learning environment (where academics typically entered their marks) to a student record system.

Administrators monitored the progress of academic marking so that delays could be identified early and escalated promptly:

> "*So we make sure that everybody has done their marking….[if they are late] we contact them and say 'why haven't you marked it?'…Then we contact the [academic lead] and say we've got a problem."* (Carol)

Kirsty described exam board preparations as the most challenging aspect of her role in assessment:

> *"It's probably ensuring that everything is done for the Boards of Examiners. So, it's probably a capacity/time thing, and having to rely on another people to have met deadlines."* (Kirsty)

There was a sense that the scale and complexity of administrative actions and preparation were invisible, particularly compared to other key stages of the student journey:

> *"We kind of work on the big flagship events, so Clearing, Enrolment, Graduation are our big major three. And I would also slide [exam boards] into that as well just because it's such a big core function of the University […] but it's not necessarily given the value it deserves […] It's almost like it just happens as a kind of administrative process, it's like part of the academic year, which it is, but there is so much underpinning that goes along with it […clearing, enrolment, graduation…] they're big events, they're visible, they're seen by the institution as key points in the year [whereas exam boards] just tend to happen, but I think they deserve more [recognition]."* (Louise)

The exam boards themselves ran well because *"the people that are prepping […] are working hard to make sure that the right outcomes are there"* (Sarah). Similarly, Carol suggests the invisibility of administrative tasks hides the impact that delays with marking can have:

> *"They've [academics] got different perceptions of what needs to be done and they think if it's done, you know, before the day of the [exam board] that that's fine, but from systems perspective it's really not. Because you know, [the team] need a couple of days to get all the data in the system, ready for all of that information to be ready for them at the [exam board]."* (Carol)

The work was requiring more administrative effort to deliver, particularly when the scale of the activity had increased, technology could not be fully utilised, and if academic activities such as marking were not completed when planned. This account shares many similarities to the account of examinations assessment, however, as I will show, administrators in exam board administration had less control over the work.

Re-shaping the qualities of exam board work - technology

As well as increasing in scale, the preparation for exam boards was becoming more technical as HEIs made better use of their systems. Assessment regulations that set out which award a student can achieve based on their assessment marks have been programmed into systems so that the system can apply the rules and predict the outcome, for the exam board to review. HEIs in this research were all trying to increase their use of the system to support this decision-making process:

> *"Where we're trying to get to with the new system is…[academics] need to focus on making sure that the marks are right, and then the system will calculate what that means, and if that's clear and obvious, then you don't need to worry about that in the exam board"* (Janet)

Making more use of student systems to calculate assessment results was creating new work to maintain the system to support exam boards. Administrators checked that the rules in the system worked correctly as part of exam board preparation, taking decisions to amend them if errors were found. For example, ensuring that course naming conventions set out in academic policy were accurately reflected in the system, that the correct calculations of passing grade were set up, and that regulations about progression and award requirements were configured.

There were rich descriptions of this technical configuration work to make sure the student system was configured correctly, highlighting that administrators were building and mobilising technical and regulatory knowledge. Administration managers consistently took decisions on reconfiguring student systems to support assessment processes, (Carol, David, George, Esther, Janet, Louise, Michelle, Peter, Sarah). For example, changing the codes used in the student system to record exam board decisions:

> *"When we review the [exam board codes] on the [student system] and we decide what ones we're going to change, then [IT] will make it [the change] on my authority to do*

that, so that won't need to go through any sort of process. And yeah, so changing the processes is pretty much down to us [administrators]." (George)

Such decisions were sometimes required as part of the implementation of academic decisions to change how assessment is strategically delivered, which were discussed in Chapter 5.

I explained earlier in this chapter that when administrators introduced technology to support examination scheduling, this introduced new technical knowledge to the scheduling activity, which served to solidify administrative control over the task. In exam boards, the configuration of the system – which was more extensive than in examination scheduling - required administrators to develop new technical knowledge and improving their knowledge of the regulations, but it did not appear to be having the same effect on the division of labour.

Some of the regulatory and technical knowledge developed from configuring the student system with the HEI regulations resulted in those administrators becoming *'experts' (Kirsty)* in the regulations themselves:

> *"[This team] are the experts on the regulations, and quite often will challenge the validating body in a Board of Examiners if they say something that's' not in line with the regulations… So, for example, at Level 3, they'll [the validating body] say, "Well, why haven't you compensated this student?", and we have said, "Your regulations say that we can't compensate at Level 3," that was a conversation that we seem to have every year." (Kirsty)*

Despite developing this expertise in regulations, there was no notable shift observed in the division of labour, such as delegated decision-making seen in student casework. In fact, as I will show in the next section, there was a clear lack of administrative authority for exam board decisions that were collectively perceived to be academic decisions, and in contrast to the administrative advice sought out in student casework, administrative advice to exam boards was sometimes resisted.

Resisting administrative advice

Administrators described a specific remit for developing knowledge of the administrative and academic workforce in relation to exam board processes, practices and regulations (George, Janet, Kirsty, Michelle, Peter, Sarah).

> *"I run training sessions probably 4 times a years, there are 3 training sessions; one is for Chairs of Exam Boards, one is for the regulations, and one is for basically that one's for administrators so it's how you process an run an exam board."* (Sarah)

In addition to delivering training and guidance, administrators were positioned in advisory roles at exam boards, whose role was to "*ensure the integrity of our awards according to the regulations"* (Peter). He explained that administrators interpreted the regulations to enable exam board decisions for more complex cases, using their procedural knowledge to find justifiable outcomes. Louise used similar language about upholding the regulations, describing her role as to *"ensure that the regulations are upheld in all cases and with equity for all students".* She expands on this:

> *"We're the ones that make sure there's equity. I mean equity is like my base-line for everything, and it being for all students, so there is no group of students that's getting preferential or detrimental treatment because of something that might be happening elsewhere in the institution. Or that we are applying the regulations in a fair manner for all students. And being able to identify the rationale of decisions that are being made for progression." (Louise)*

Despite using the language of 'ensuring' equity, Louise had no decision-making authority and she explained that the work could be challenging, as academic decision-makers sometimes tried to make decisions that are not in line with the regulations. Unlike in student casework discussed earlier in this chapter, the involvement of administrators in managing knowledge and providing advice on assessment regulations appeared to be more contentious and resisted by academics in the context of exam boards. George explained: *"Sometimes you'll have administrators who contact us after a Board who say, 'They asked this, I told them this, but then they did this anyway'"* (George). When I asked why George he thought this was, he distinguished between the advice given by more junior administrators who intervene in an exam board decision, and the more senior advice from him and his peers, the latter being more accepted. Nevertheless, when asked what the most challenging aspect of his role in assessment was, he cited exam board advice: *"Telling the [exam board chairs] that they can or can't' do things, or usually that they can't do things that they're wanting to do something that's against the regulations"* (George).

There were conflicting views from administration managers on whether academics did not have knowledge of the regulations, or whether they knew the regulations but did not agree with them and therefore tried to take alternative decisions. Sarah perceived that academics did not learn regulations, making references to administrators being *"keeper of the regulations"* (Sarah) and the indviduals who really understood how the exam board should operate. She explained her own role in identifying decisions that were not in line with the regulations, using her experience and knowledge to quickly identify those *"when I look at a student's profile it leaps off the page at me"* (Sarah). She explained that academics rarely attended training on regulations and she appeared frustrated at what she perceived to be a lack of engagement and academic ownership of exam board decisions. Sarah did not want the authority of taking decisions, she recounted an example from within an exam board:

> *"So they are looking at the student's profile in front of them, I then point out 'this was recommended for this [student], but according to the regulations the student hasn't got…' so I go 'so you're the Board, I'm the secretary, do you agree with that judgement, do you agree with what I've just said?'. Because I say to them, 'I don't make decisions. I just tell them where the decisions that have been made are inaccurate'."* (Sarah)

George and Louise, however, believed that often academics did know the regulations, but wanted to make decisions that were not in line with the regulations. George explained:

> *"The administrative staff are usually the ones that say 'That's not possible, that's against the regulations'…And the chair is like 'Oh is it really?', and actually sometimes I think they probably know but they're just chancing it to see if they can." (George)*

In a similar vein, Janet explained that sometimes senior administration managers were proactively sought by senior academics, even when the regulatory position was clear, to provide expert advice on a decision that may be unpopular with their academics peers, so that the academic did not have to take the unpopular decision themselves:

> *"I don't know, its '[Registry] won't let us do stuff' but on the other hand that is kind of what we're there for. Because also you get [academic leads] wanting somebody to*

> *say no for them […] the [academic lead] said 'I don't actually support this but I'm sending them up anyway' […] they wanted me to make the decision to say no. So, I gave them a perfectly reasoned decision as to why this was not at all appropriate."* (Janet)

The experience of administrators using their regulatory knowledge to provide advice to exam boards contrasts with their experiences of providing similar advice in student casework. It was not clear from the administration manager's themselves why this case the case, however, in the next section I summarise the collective forces affecting exam board work to offer an explanation.

Collective resistance to change

I suggest that part of the resistance to administrative advice about exam board decisions, reflects a resistance to a suite of changes that have been taking place within HEI that have gradually, collectively, diminished the scope academics have to make decisions within exam boards.

In Chapter 4 I demonstrated that there were significant changes taking place within some HEI in relation to their academic strategy and internal frameworks, sometimes multiple changes at the same time. I highlighted a trajectory towards more standardised internal frameworks that could ensure more consistent decision-making, although I noted there were differences in how prescriptive these frameworks were. In relation to exam boards, there were specific trends.

First, the breadth of decisions taken at exam boards has decreased. Exam board decisions draw on other assessment decisions governed by their own frameworks, for example: academic judgements applied to individual pieces of assessment; decisions about the application of penalties for late or over-length work; decisions about requests for extenuating circumstances; and about suspected misconduct. Earlier in this Chapter, I reported that some decisions have become criteria-based, including decisions about extenuating circumstances. Such decisions have also been removed from the exam board and placed elsewhere in the governance structure. Janet explained how the exam board used to take decisions on extenuating circumstances: *"if the student came out to be borderline in their classification, then in the light of those extenuating circumstances, they might get put up to the next class"* (Janet). Now, decisions about extenuating circumstances have increasingly been removed

from the exam board, as policies have moved to *"mitigate for the problem at the time of the assessment"* (Janet) rather than at the exam board. In some instances, the exam board still has to *"technically accept the outcomes"* (Brian) from student casework, but those are seen as a formality (Brian, Peter). The actual eligibility for extenuating circumstances is decided outside of the exam board. This removal of decisions about extenuating circumstances is indicative of a broader shift from the traditional operation where exam boards had a wide-ranging freedom to make academic judgements over individual students and their academic achievement and progress, including some discretion over the degree classification of a student. Over time, the decision-making authority of exam boards has been fragmented; decisions that were previously the remit of the exam board have been separated as distinct decision-making activities.

Second, the decisions that remain within the scope of an exam board have become more standardised. Many HEIs have revised their assessment regulations, which are used by exam boards to make decisions on student achievement, to be more criteria-based (Brian, Carol, David, Esther, George, Janet, Louise, Michelle). Sarah explained how exam boards operate with more standardised rules in place:

> *"What the Board does is it ensures that the student has been, the award has been made in line with the regulations; you're not actually saying 'this student's a really good student' or 'they've got a first class dissertation' or anything like that, all you are doing and concentrating on is 'has that student met the requirement, the regulatory requirement for the award that they're gaining' and if they haven't where's the justification for that? You don't go through all the students, you only go through those students who are anomalous to the regulations, which I identify."*
> (Sarah)

From the HEIs in this research, there were different degrees of standardisation in place, but in all instances, administrators were described as advisers to the board: "*this is the advice of how we would interpret the regulations or what we understand or what you should do"* (George). Furthermore, all HEIs were trying to use their student systems to help the decision-making process. However, George highlighted the cultural challenge that came with this, and reiterated the reluctance of academics to simply accept the calculation of the outcome based on prescribed regulations:

> *"It [the system] should spit out the right decision. Often what happens is that the Board will spend exorbitant amounts of time discussing it, and with the administrator tearing their hair out saying "You can't do anything other than this, the system is set up that you can only do that." So, that's why we're trying to get to a point... of saying actually there's transparency and visibility in the marks, in the algorithms that we use, that's it and it's end of story, you know, you cannot change that because you'd be going against the regulations…But it's an uphill battle" (George)*

George felt there was an uphill battle to break a culture of wanting to discuss every single student, whether this was because academics felt they should be able to influence individual decisions, or to simply acknowledge the achievements of each student was unclear. George, however, felt that this approach was unnecessary and difficult to maintain when there are "*tight deadlines in terms of result processing and exam boards"* (George).

During the data generation, the descriptions of assessment administration in exam boards prompted the most profound professional reflection on my part. In my research notes after the third interview (Sarah) I noted:

> *"Hearing someone else describe their Exam Board processes, makes me question what the real purpose of these meetings are. How much, in reality, are the Boards making academic judgements and the extent to which there needs to be a formal meeting (or 3 in this case!). And question the extent to which this is sustainable. It creates significant pressure and stress for all involved."* (My data generation diary)

I went on to note:

> *"Have we (the sector) got ourselves in a bit of a trap trying to comply and demonstrate quality and standards through the wrong process? Do different things matter now? We need to be smarter to work more efficiently – should we stop 'pretending' that the board is taking decisions when actually they are just applying the regulations. There is a lot of effort in this process to maintain the boundaries of the academic areas but is it really where our effort should be?"* (My data generation diary)

As I continued with the data generation, and administration managers continued to describe the pressures they experienced delivering the exam board processes, training the workforce

on the regulations, advising academics on what the decisions should be, intervening to prevent incorrect decisions being made, I began to conceptualise exam board work as one of the organisational 'blind spots' that Rhoades suggested may exist.

Several administration managers noted similar observations, such as viewing the role of an academic exam board chair as a ceremonial rather than meaningful role: *"Chairs are quite – ceremonial role is the wrong word potentially, but they are. They just read through an agenda and make sure the meeting happens."* (Michelle). Brian mused about a future where exam board decisions were strictly rules-based:

> *"My personal view is if you can try and avoid any room for discretion, that would be preferable. But that's counter to what a lot of academic staff would think, especially for [exam boards], because you think, 'Well what's the point of having them?' Now, I'd say, in an ideal world, have absolutely everything automatic, and then you don't need [exam boards] and you can save the university a lot of time by doing that, but there's still some traditions which would be quite difficult to do away with."* (Brian)

And when pressed on why that would be difficult, he responded:

> *"Cultural factors, I think. Partly tradition. Partly about the view that academic staff should have an input, and at least some prospect of executing some academic judgment, other than the actual marks that they've awarded in the first place which are the core academic judgments that they're making. So, some of it, it's the weight of history rather than anything specific to [my university]."* (Brian)

The extensive descriptions of exam board activity reflected David's observation about the lack of fundamental change that has really taken place within HEI, that the sector has tried to "*add technology on top of our existing ways and systems of working*" rather than fundamentally questioning the approach, which for exam boards David describes as *"terribly 19th century"* (David).

I suggest that there is a collective resistance, or rather, an organisational blind spot in the management of exam boards. Examining its evolution suggests that the function of an exam board may have gradually changed. HEIs are seeking more efficient ways to deliver a robust decision-making process as part of an increasingly complex operation, but perhaps are not going far enough to fundamentally question and re-affirm the purpose of a contemporary

exam board and the knowledge that is essential for its delivery. This is leading to a confused contribution from administrators, where the regulatory knowledge they hold, and use, is not valued. At the same time, administrators feel the need to hold and use this knowledge to ensure compliant decisions are made. However, all the time administrators hold and mobilise this knowledge, there may be a continued disengagement – perceived or actual - from academics in acquiring, respecting or shaping the regulatory frameworks themselves.

I do not personally advocate for a particular model of exam boards or administrative authority going forward, there are many possibilities; but what my findings suggest is that there is a need to re-evaluate and re-confirm the purpose of the exam board process, the knowledge required, who holds or needs to hold that knowledge, and then design appropriate processes and systems needed to support it. After having to operate streamlined and online exam boards during the Covid-19 pandemic, new exam board models are emerging where the core academic judgements are made at module level in advance of an exam board, which has a vastly reduced purpose and form (Kingston University, 2021).

The evolution of exam board work has the closest resemblance to Abbott's notion of a contested area of control. There were many changes taking place in many spaces, and both academics and administrators were operating in the thick of these changes. This is represented visually (Figure 5), where exam board work has a close connection to students and to HEI frameworks, and increasingly to technology, and where administrators have a closeness to the frameworks and technologies, yet academics retain a closeness to the student assessment experience and academic aspects of exam boards. There was a perceived loss of academic authority brought about by the gradual changes to the scope of exam boards, and there is an increasingly knowledgeable administrative workforce who understand how the complex decision-making process needs to work. However, the notion of a 'contest' suggests that administrators are seeking additional control and authority over decisions, and my data did not indicate that administrators wanted more control; they respected the academic authority to take exam board decisions but desired more engagement from their academic colleagues.

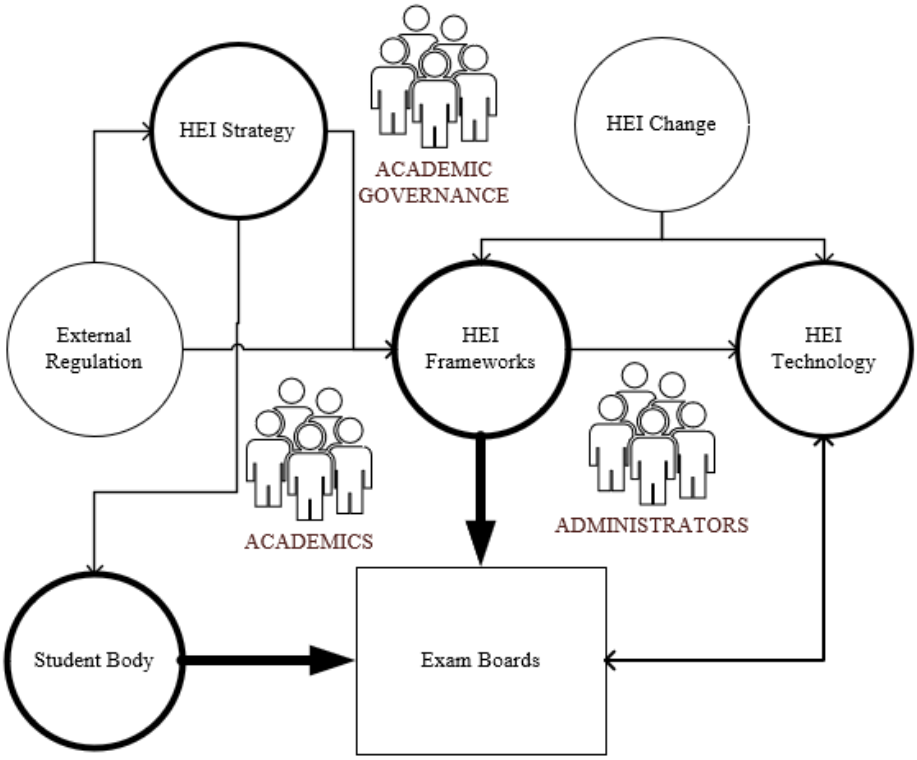

Figure 5: Resisting change in complex exam boards

Summary of exam boards: an identity crisis?

The area of exam boards represented the most complex area to make claims about the changes in work, knowledge and authority. Given its centrality to the assessment process, it represented the largest data set, and was a site of tension and frustration.

Broadly, the boundaries of academic and administrative authority in exam boards were consistent across HEIs, yet there were apparent contradictions in the accounts of administrative responsibilities, where administrators were charged with ensuring the rules were adhered to, but not holding authority to take decisions themselves. The work had increased in scale and become more technical, sharing many characteristics with the evolution of examinations, but had not resulted in the same sense of operational ownership examinations managers conveyed. The work had also become more reliant on regulatory knowledge, used by administrators to guide and advise, sharing characteristics with student casework, but had not resulted in any changes in the division of labour and administrative regulatory knowledge appear less valued in exam boards. The differences in administrative influence and control can be explained by the collective changes that have impacted exam

boards, which could be perceived as fragmenting the academic decision-making authority of exam boards, standardising the decisions that remain to be taken, and increasing reducing the need for interpretation by an exam board due to the systematisation of rules. Taken together, the acquisition of regulatory knowledge by administrators to enable exam board decisions could be perceived by academics as a challenge to their academic authority.

Through the illustration of examinations, I have suggested examination operations have become increasing distant from core academic work, which has resulted in it being less visible. Through the illustration of student casework, I have suggested the work has become increasingly regulated, resulting in the revaluing of regulatory knowledge, and offers opportunities to unburden academics through delegated decisions. I suggest this illustration of exam boards raises more fundamental questions for HEIs about their assessment operations, representing a collective organisational blind spot in how the exam board operation in its entirety has been impacted by changes of the last twenty or so years. It is an area that has undergone proactive evolution, but sometimes arising from disjointed and isolated initiatives: regulation change, technology use, extenuating circumstances process change. There are risks with such evolutions that these initiatives are not joined-up in their end goal, and a risk that HEI do not push themselves far enough to question whether core underlying assumptions about the purpose of an activity remain the same.

Conclusion

I will now draw together the key threads from this chapter, that relate to using the system of professions approach to trace the evolution of changes in the control of work, making claims about contested or vacant areas of work, and the significance of these findings to HEI leaders.

Forces, visibility and engagement

In Chapter 5 I claimed that administrators held and mobilised diverse forms of knowledge that had become important to decisions about assessment in a more complex, uncertain and regulated environment, and that they mobilised this knowledge in more influential ways. In this chapter I have applied the system of professions approach to seek explanation for why it is that administrators, rather than academics, have acquired this knowledge that makes them more influential. There were three themes that emerged from this examination of three areas of assessment administration.

First, the central tasks of assessment administration were all undergoing changes, yet the tasks were being reshaped in different ways depending on the impact of external and internal forces. Examinations was becoming more operationally complex, as there was significant external change without equivalent internal changes to academic practice. Student casework was becoming more procedurally complex, with higher risks of non-compliance, from both external and internal forces. Exam boards was undergoing changes at multiple levels, directly and indirectly from external and internal forces.

Second, the visibility of administrative work, and therefore the visibility of changes to the work and emerging problems was not equal. Operational tasks were least visible, and as a result, changes in the areas that were operationally heavy (examinations and exam boards), were not widely understood. In contrast, regulatory work was increasingly visible, and in student casework, which was procedurally heavy, the value and importance of administrative contributions to maintaining external and internal regulatory knowledge could be easily traced to external compliance.

Third, there was a theme of academic disengagement in areas of assessment administration. In examinations, this was a gradual disengagement from the increasingly operational work associated with delivering examinations. In student casework this was a lack of engagement with new external knowledge frameworks as they emerged. In exam boards this was a perceived lack of engagement with the established HEI frameworks; either a lack of engagement with maintaining knowledge about them, or a dis-engagement from valuing their purpose.

Contested or vacant areas of control

I reported in Chapter 2 that there is a gap in the literature about our understanding of how the control of work is changing, whether more influential administrative contributions represent a challenge to academic authority, and whether administrators are perceived to be meddling in academic matters or helpfully unburdening stretched academics.

Through this chapter I have shown that administrative work and administrative authority was developing in different ways in three areas of assessment administration and have suggested that the boundary of academic and administrative authority is evolving differently because these three areas of work, have different core qualities, are affected by external and internal

forces differently, and importantly they have a different connection to academic work. As such, the changes in each area are perceived to pose different threats to academic authority.

I adopted Abbott's concept of contested and vacant areas of control to characterise the evolution of assessment administration in a way that can contribute to this gap in the literature. I suggested the evolutions of administrative influence in both examinations and student cases align with a vacancy model, where administrators have gained or consolidated knowledge in areas where academics have chosen not to, and this has given them more influence, and in some cases control. In examinations, administrators have solidified and expanded their control over operational matters which became more operationally and technically complex. In student casework, administrators consolidated their expertise in regulatory frameworks, giving them a strong position of influence.

I reported similar changes taking place in exam board administration, with different impacts, and suggested that despite significant changes in exam board work, the division of labour was not changing. As a result, I characterised the evolution of exam boards as contested. In particular, I suggested that academics perceived the gradual changes to exam board work as a challenge to their authority, and they are actively resisting any changes in the division of labour that could arise from the increased acquisition of operational, technical and regulatory knowledge by administrators.

The changes seen in examinations and student casework could both be regarded as a form of unburdening, where administrative contributions are valued, even if their complexity is not visible. In contrast, changes in exam board work are much closer to the core academic tasks and judgements involved with assessment and may be perceived as meddling. My findings contribute to the debates in the literature about perceived changes in academic authority, by supporting the notion that academics have enabled other workers to gain more influence over academic matters by not staking their claim on new areas of work that have emerged (Rhoades, 2010) and having disengaged from parts of the traditional academic remit as academic work has come under increasing pressure and begun to fragment (Macfarlane, 2011). My findings also highlight that these changes are not understood, and I have suggested that there are organisational blind spots in how assessment administration is changing. I discuss the implications of these blind spots for higher education leaders in the next chapter.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

Introduction

In this final chapter I draw together the main findings from this research and highlight their significance. I begin by summarising the findings relating to each of the research sub-questions, and the overarching research question, highlighting how these findings add to the existing knowledge base on higher education administrative work (HEAW). I move on to report the theoretical and methodological contribution to knowledge this thesis makes, before surfacing the practical implications that these findings have for higher education leaders and managers.

Explaining changes in higher education administrative work

I set out the overarching research question that this thesis sought to address in Chapter 1:

> How does applying a system of professions approach to the examination of assessment administration within English higher education institutions explain the changing nature of higher education administrative work?

From this, I developed three sub-questions that arose from my review of the literature and my adoption of Andrew Abbott's system of professions theory. Taken together, the answers to these sub-questions provide an answer to the overarching question. I take each research sub-question in turn before drawing overall conclusions.

RQ1: How and why is assessment administration changing?

I found that assessment administration was becoming more complex because of external environmental forces, and forces internal to individual HEI.

I addressed this question in Chapter 4, drawing on Abbott's concepts of forces, work tasks, problems and knowledge. I reported thematic findings about how assessment administration was changing, finding that external and internal forces were creating new problems, reshaping the qualities of administrative work, and reshaping administrative knowledge. These findings contribute new scholarly knowledge about how the complex environment is

impacting administrative work and provide new insight into the factors internal to HEIs that structure work, sometimes making administration more complex.

I argued that these findings reveal what Rhoades (2010) has called a blind spot in our research and practice. In research, differences between HEIs have often distinguished based on an HEI's historical status or mission group, but based on my findings, I suggest that we should instead be seeking to understand how differences can be explained by an HEI's strategy, frameworks, technology and approach to change. I return to this point later in the chapter to surface the practical implications arising from this blind spot.

RQ2: What influence and authority do administrators have over assessment?

I found that administrators have considerable influence over assessment operations and frameworks, while their authority to take decisions was restricted to operational matters or clearly delegated procedural realms.

I addressed this question in Chapter 5, drawing on the findings from a detailed analysis of assessment decisions, where I adopted and adapted several of Abbott's concepts (described in Chapter 3). I used Abbott's concepts of diagnosis, inference and treatment to identify forms of administrative contributions to decisions. Administrators contributed to everyday decisions as supporter, guide, expert or decision-maker. Administrators initiated, facilitated, recommended or decided on changes to assessment practice. Administration managers also implemented decisions arising from assessment change.

I developed a definition of administrative authority and influence, adapted from Abbott's concept of jurisdiction through my analysis process:

- Taking decisions
- Interpreting and translating existing knowledge frameworks
- Contributing to strategic decisions that change the nature of work, knowledge or who undertakes the work

I reported themes about administrative influence and authority. I found that administrators had the most influence over operational matters, often demonstrating administrative authority. I found that administrators had a strong influence over regulatory matters, often demonstrating administrative expertise. I found that administrative contributions to academic

matters was the most varied, characterising it as strategic support. I found that administrators demonstrated a clear perception to the boundaries of their authority yet were sometimes excluded from the decision-making about assessment changes, which sometimes created challenges with implementation. I suggested that these findings reveal a blind spot in our practice, where the knowledge and experience of academic administration managers is not always recognised as a valuable contribution to the decision-making process of assessment change. I return to this point when discussing the practical implications of this research.

I showed that, in making these contributions to assessment decisions, administration managers mobilised diverse forms of knowledge, sometimes in complex forms. I suggested their contributions were the result of assessment having become more complex, and that the contributions indicated administration managers were more influential than in the past. In particular, I suggested that when administrators were involved as experts in problem-solving, or initiating, facilitating or recommending assessment change, their work could be characterised as cross-boundary professionals. This signals a departure from the characterisation of academic administration managers as bounded professionals, who have a concern for maintaining order, towards making strategic contributions to shaping their HEI (Whitchurch, 2008a). These findings extend the existing literature on HEAW by providing insight into the work of academic administration managers in England as a distinct group and demonstrating their evolution from previous claims. The progression of their roles is significant, as it suggests that even roles that were deemed bounded in 2008 have developed into cross-boundary roles.

RQ3: How can a system of professions approach explain the evolution of assessment administration?

The system of professions approach explains the evolution as situated, complex, fluid and shaped by both structural elements and the actions of administrators, academics and HEI management. I addressed this question in Chapter 6, drawing on the findings of the preceding chapters, and Abbott's concept of a vacant or contested area of control to tell the story of the evolution of assessment administration through changes in the work, knowledge, and division of labour.

In essence, there are external and internal forces that have made the environment more complex and are reshaping the work and the knowledge required (Chapter 4). In this more

complex environment, knowledge held by administrators has become more important, seen in how administrators contribute to assessment decisions, particularly their contributions to assessment change (Chapter 5). The reshaping of work and knowledge can lead to changes in administrative authority and influence (Chapter 6). However, changes in administrative authority and influence are not occurring consistently across assessment administration; there were some variations between HEI and between different aspects of assessment administration.

In Chapter 6 I traced the development of three separate areas of assessment administration, which had indicated different levels of administrative authority and influence. Through the lens of Abbott's vacant or contested areas of control, I concluded that the different evolutions could be explained by differences in how the work was changing, the visibility of those changes, how the contributions of administrators were perceived to add value or to challenge academic authority. Their increased involvement appeared accepted in examinations and student casework, yet resisted in exam board work, where the latter was perceived by academics to be more of a challenge to control. Overall, I suggested that there was stronger evidence of administrators influence resulting from a vacant area of control, that is, that there was a gap in activities or ownership that academics were not filling.

Overarching research question

> How does applying a system of professions approach to the examination of assessment administration within English higher education institutions explain the changing nature of higher education administrative work?

Returning to the overarching researching question, adopting the system of professions approach enables changes in higher education administrative work to be explained as follows:

There are identifiable environmental forces, external and internal to HEI, that are re-shaping assessment administration. The external forces are creating an environment that is complex, uncertain and highly regulated. This external environment is triggering externally driven problems such as new regulatory frameworks that require HEI compliance, and increased volumes of students that make operations more complex. In addition to external forces, HEI themselves are important forces in re-shaping assessment administration. These HEI forces structure the everyday work of academics, students and administrators in assessment, and they can also create additional problems. In particular, work is structured by an HEI's

strategy, frameworks, technology and culture. These forces are changing the qualities of work, changing the nature or value of knowledge and creating new problems.

These changes can affect the influence and authority that administrators have over higher education work, seen in the areas of administrative decision-making, their interpretation and translation of existing knowledge frameworks, and how they initiate, facilitate, recommend and implement changes that structure work or knowledge.

Areas of higher education administration are affected differently by these forces, depending on the nature of the central tasks, the strength of the connection to external forces and the visibility of the impact on administrative work and knowledge. Whether these forces result in a change to the overall control of work depends on whether the work is visible, and whether more administrative involvement is perceived as a challenge to academic authority.

Applying the system of professions approach offers explanation for changes in higher education administrative work becoming more strategic indicated in literature (Whitchurch, 2008a; 2018). It extends our knowledge about how administrators are involved in decision-making with their HEI, adding to, and refining the different types of decision-making identified by Whitchurch (2008a). It offers a more detailed description of the nature of decisions that senior professional leaders have been recognised as making (Coate et al, 2018). It offers new insight into the knowledge that administration managers mobilise to make or contribute to decisions, which could serve as a new working definition of administrative knowledge that is absent from the literature. Furthermore, it offers an empirical base for which to make claims about the influence that administrators have over academic matters, and in doing so, challenges the notion that administrators are actively seeking to stake a claim on new ground; the administration managers in this research demonstrated a clear perception of the boundary of their work and respect for academic authority. Nevertheless, they support claims that individual academics no longer wield as much control over some decisions as they might have done in the past; academic committees and senior individuals took many decisions for the institution.

Contribution to theory and methods in higher education research

This thesis makes a significant theoretical and methodological contribution to knowledge by:

- Developing a new framework for examining changes in higher education work.

- Demonstrating the value, and method, of analysing decision-making, influence and authority.
- Advancing the methods of data generation for higher education research.

I expand on each of these below, but first make some general observations on employing Abbott's theory for this research.

Abbott's theory was a powerful way to make connections between the changes observed in the higher education environment, the nature of work, the nature of knowledge and the boundaries of authority. It explains changes that have been absent from the literature on higher education administrative work.

By adopting Abbott, this examination has prioritised understanding first *how* the work has changed, secondly, *why* it has changed, and thirdly whether changes in the work have been accompanied with changes in *who* is doing and controlling the work. This represents a noteworthy shift from the existing research in an English context, which has more often focused on analysing the lived experiences of those working within HEIs. Methodologically, it has shown the value of focussing on detailed analysis of the work itself by revealing new understanding about how knowledge is held and mobilised by administrators and academics. It has also revealed tensions in the experience of undertaking that work and enabled comparison between sites.

I have developed and utilised an empirical way to investigate and form a judgement on the influence that a group of workers has. This has enabled claims to be made about how and why workers may have different authority or influence than in the past, that can move the scholarly debate beyond academic complaints about the loss of authority. It has shown the value of understanding the context where the work takes place.

A new framework

My findings constitute a new framework for examining and explaining changes in the nature of work, knowledge, and influence. I have created a visual representation of my findings using the system of professions approach in assessment administration, and to show how a system of professions approach can be used to examine changes in higher education work, addressing one of the criticisms of Abbott's elaborate and complex style **[Appendix 8]**. In this section I set out two initial proposals for its future use in research.

The first is to expand and replicate this study, to further understand how assessment work is changing within HEI. This research focused solely on the perceptions of expert commentators on administrative contributions to assessment, which I justified in Chapter 3 based on the initial nature of this exploration of both assessment administration and applying Abbot's theory. The analysis has focused solely on the academic and administrative boundary, and therefore administrative influence. Using the framework, this examination of assessment could be expanded to now include academic perspectives on contributions to assessment decisions, adding richness to the data generated about the academic and administrative boundary. It could also be expanded to explore the contributions that IT workers, technicians, learning technologists, academic developers, student support workers and others make to assessment; all of whom appeared on the administration manager's role maps.

The second is to adopt the framework to explore and compare the contributions of different HEI workers in major change decisions within their HEI required to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, HEI across the world experienced rapid and institution-wide decision-making as they responded to the global pandemic, and many are still making decisions about how they return to on-campus delivery for 2022 and beyond. The pandemic provides a rare opportunity to explore and compare the contributions of different HEI workers to similar major change decisions within HEIs, and my research framework could be replicated and extended to examine those contributions.

Analysing decisions and influence

I have demonstrated a new approach to analysing decisions within higher education. I propose that there are four critical steps to analysing decisions (discussed in Chapter 3) that can be adapted and replicated for future research:

1. Adopting Abbott's concepts to determine who is making the decision (treatment), who is reasoning about the options (inference), who has identified the issue (diagnosis).
2. Identifying the variety of ways that workers contribute to the acts of diagnosis inference and treatment.
3. Identifying the form of knowledge being mobilised by different actors in the decision-making process.
4. Looking for patterns between the contribution of workers, the forms of knowledge and other pertinent factors relevant to the research questions.

I suggest that influence over an area of work in higher education can be seen through:

- Decision-making
- Managing knowledge needed for the act of inference
- Initiating, facilitating or implementing changes that structure work or knowledge

From this analysis, claims about influence can be made at different levels: about the influence over a work area, over a specific element of practice, or the influence of an individual.

Generating data about higher education work

This research has generated data through qualitative interviews, and through participant-generated role maps. There was value in exploring examples of decisions and examples of change through the research interviews, however, as I noted in Chapter 3, not all examples of change could be fully analysed as they were not all explored in the same level of detail, and some examples of everyday decisions were implicit in the data. There are lessons for future research, to reduce the reliance on researcher interpretation, by explicitly seeking examples of decision-making from participants, and ensuring that discussion of changes includes drivers, discusses all critical actors in the decision-making process and explores the legitimacy for action.

I found that the inclusion of role maps provided me, as the researcher, with an additional lens into the world as viewed by the administration manager. It facilitated rich description in the interview process because the administration managers had already spent time reflecting on their experiences and their working relationships. These role-maps also helped me build a picture of the organisational structure the administration manager worked within; given the diversity of organisational structures, functional units and their groupings within English HEI the use of role maps have the potential to support and enhance the examination of HEIs as workplaces. It is possible that an alternative pre-interview activity could be devised that could generate professional reflection specific to decision-making and change, that could assist in the rich description and exploration of decisions.

Practical implications for higher education institutions

I stated in Chapter 1 that I wanted this research to have practical implications for the higher education workforce, so that we can better manage our collective efforts and respond to the

increasingly complex and uncertain environment. In this section I reflect on the practical implications that my findings have for those working in English HEIs, addressing the issue of blind spots in practice that has run through the findings of this thesis.

Administrative invisibility and organisational blind spots

I have highlighted that there has been a perception that administrative work and the administrative workforce was invisible (Szekeres, 2004; Rhoades 2010) and that their invisibility has the potential to constitute 'blind spots' within HEI about how the organisation is working and how it can improve (Rhoades, 2010). My findings confirmed that there was sometimes a perception that administrative work was not visible, and that the substantial administrative effort to deliver large-scale activities was not well understood within their HEI's by academic colleagues or senior management. My findings reveal additional layers to this notion of invisibility than has previously been discussed in the literature, which has practical implications for how HEIs manage themselves.

First, there were blind spots in the visibility of emerging problems from administrative spheres of decision-making. Administration managers were proactively finding operational solutions to problems, that really required a fundamental shift in academic assessment practice to properly address. Potential administrative problems appeared to be invisible in some decisions about assessment change, resulting in outcomes that were difficult to implement, or that needed revising after being made. The invisibility of emerging problems was also making administrative work harder, for example, if a new assessment strategy could not be fully systematised it resulted in administrative workarounds that were complex and with higher risk of error. While we, as administrators, may be able to make decisions to change practice within our legitimate spheres of decision-making, there is a risk that we are putting sticking plasters over bigger issues if we are not able to make these changes visible and understood to a wider audience.

Second, there were indications of institution-wide blind spots in challenging existing ways of operating: that is, there appeared a lack of critical questioning about the end goal of a process or activity or change initiative, and with this, a potential missed opportunity to deliver impactful change. For example, the emergence of delegated decision-making in student casework has the potential to release academic time and capacity and could improve the student experience of those activities if delivered by a dedicated administrative team, yet a

traditional boundary between academic and administrative authority was being maintained. Furthermore, there was evidence that we are adding technology to our existing ways of operating, rather than using technology as a catalyst to rethink the whole process and clarify the end goal. This blind spot is perhaps reflective of a wider issue about how we retain organisational boundaries within HEIs, where academic issues are considered in one domain and administrative issues in another. Such a division can mask both administrative and academic issues when changes were made and as such is better articulated as a lack of understanding within an HEI of their internal structure and its connectedness. I propose that administration managers and academic leaders need to have a shared responsibility to ensure the identification of issues and resolutions are considered as collective issues.

Third, blind spots and invisibility were not inevitable. Some administration managers described joined-up and collaborative approaches to solving institutional problems that considered both academic and administrative concerns. For example, in small HEI where the senior administration managers lead the operational and regulatory elements of seeking degree awarding powers, while academics lead on the academic elements. There appeared a more inclusive approach to problem-solving at HEIs where the impact of a change to regulations, or technology was anticipated, resulting in the inclusion of regulatory or system administrative experts throughout the decision-making process. In such instances, I suggest that the HEIs were recognising "assessment" as a space that requires multi-disciplinary knowledge to solve complex problems, and are, as Rhoades (2010) suggested they should, leveraging the intellectual capital of administration managers to the HEI's strategic advantage.

Tackling blind spots: what can be done?

In the rest of this section, I propose some ways that HEIs can overcome invisibility or organisational blind spots, by understanding their internal structure, by reviewing frameworks, considering areas of delegated decision making, and clarifying areas that require academic engagement.

Understanding the HEI structure and workforce knowledge

As a priority, HEI leaders should ensure they have a solid understanding of their HEI structure (strategy, frameworks, technology, processes, workforce, students, academic

practice and the interconnections of these elements) and where knowledge rests in the workforce.

I have argued in Chapter 4 that when an HEI strategy is complex, it can have many intersections and possibly contradictions, which can create a need for more complex administrative processes and can put additional pressure on the academic and administrative workforce. By understanding their internal structure, HEIs have the potential to ease the burden of everyday work tasks on parts of the academic and administrative workforce by reducing the complexity arising from strategic decisions, by recognising and appropriately resourcing complexity, and ensuring emerging problems from all parts of the HEI are surfaced and given due attention. Furthermore, understanding the HEI structure should lead to the engagement of a wider group of internal stakeholders in change decisions to ensure that change does not have unintended consequences.

Identifying where knowledge rests within the HEI will also help surface potential knowledge gaps. Administration managers indicated challenges with expert regulatory knowledge required for problem-solving that was developed through hands-on experience. Such potential knowledge gaps present risks, and these risks turned to issues in at least three of the thirteen HEIs in this research. I also provided evidence that some HEIs had not continued to invest in developing their systems, and that there are challenges in retaining student-systems knowledge. As HEIs continue to utilise technology to improve their processes, the need for technical knowledge and skills is likely to increase, yet my findings suggest this is a further potential blind spot within HEIs.

Reviewing HEI frameworks to release capacity

I have argued that HEI internal framework's structure everyday work, that knowledge of these frameworks is being developed by administrators, making them critical actors in the resolution of complex procedural problems that arise. Furthermore, the complexity of internal frameworks, and the changes made to them, create additional everyday work associated with maintaining knowledge of the academic and administrative workforce who are required to use procedural knowledge to support or take decisions. HEIs have the potential to reduce the burden of internal knowledge-management associated with internal frameworks in several ways. If appropriate, frameworks could be simplified so that they require less interpretation to ensure they are applied correctly. Systems and processes could be designed to automate

decisions where these are prescribed in frameworks to reduce the possibility of non-compliant decisions. Alternatively, some decisions could be taken by those that hold the procedural expertise, rather than academics, for example, in the resolution of academic appeals or complaints.

Consider areas of delegated decision-making

I have also argued through Chapter 5 and 6 that there are emerging new divisions of labour arising from the standardisation of parts of internal frameworks, that have enabled some everyday decisions to be delegated to administrators. This was particularly evident in the areas of student casework, where some everyday decisions associated with academic appeals and extenuating circumstances requests have been delegated to administrators. As these are both areas of likely continued growth, there is potential for HEIs to consider the extent to which they use their frameworks to enable more delegated decision-making that can unburden academics.

Clarifying academic and administrative expectations

This thesis challenges perceptions that administrators are staking their claim over academic territory. Instead, it suggests that where administrators have considerable influence, there has been a degree of academic disengagement. This disengagement was reflected in distancing from increasingly complex operations, a lack of knowledge or acceptance of HEI internal frameworks and failing to engage in governance structures that control and shape work. Academics no longer hold all forms of knowledge required to deliver assessment in the more complex environment. Furthermore, administrative mobilisation of knowledge was not always valued, and was sometimes resisted, which I suggest has arisen in part from a lack of shared understanding, or shared acceptance, of administrative responsibilities. There is a steep cultural challenge to address here, which begins with clarifying the expectation of both academic and administrative workers in core activities.

Conclusion

We currently lack sufficient knowledge about higher education administrative work and how it is evolving. Without this knowledge we cannot really know how best to manage ourselves and deliver a better student and staff experience. I have shown how administrative work in assessment is changing, and how administrators are making significant contributions to their

HEI's, sometimes taking on tasks that were previously the remit of academic staff and making strategic contributions through engaging in change. I have also shown that there are alternative models of operating, organisational blind spots in our collective understanding of our internal operations, and a lack of clarity over administrative roles in some contexts.

These findings are significant for how we conceptualise, debate and implement changes to higher education work. We must strive to understand the internal workings of our HEIs and how things connect, so we can make better decisions. We need to better understand and challenge existing practice, by focusing on understanding what forms of knowledge are needed to undertake higher education tasks and to solve complex problems, and then engage the appropriate workers who hold this knowledge, wherever they sit in organisational structures. My findings highlight crucial questions about what administrative and academic engagement in operational, regulatory and academic strategy should look like. Above all, these findings highlight the need for HEIs to foster a culture of collaboration, to recognise and use the knowledge and skills of all parts of its workforce, without fear that wider collaboration removes academic authority.

As we emerge from the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused disruption, forced innovation and ruthlessly tested the resilience of the higher education sector, HEIs and their workforce will need to re-group and re-prioritise. The external environment may become even more complex and uncertain, and while HE workers may feel powerless in the ability to control the external trajectories of increased regulation, student expectations and technological innovation in society, my findings show that HEIs as organisations, academics and administrators, have power to build resilience, shape their internal operations and develop a more collaborative working environment.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Invitations

Invitation to Participate (Initial Email)

Subject: Invitation to participate in research on assessment administration

Dear colleagues

I am currently undertaking a Professional Doctorate in Education at the University of Nottingham, and am seeking volunteers to take part in my research study.

My research is exploring the roles of administrators in supporting student assessment, from the perspective of senior and middle managers working in this area. It is hoped that the study will contribute to the emerging research area on university administrators, and more broadly on the nature of higher education work.

Who can take part?

I am seeking to interview senior and middle administration managers (National Pay point 37 or above) from UK higher education institutions who have responsibility for aspects of assessment administration, either at a University or Faculty level.

"Assessment administration" is defined very broadly to encompass aspects of administration, systems, policy, regulations, and strategy relating to areas of work that support student assessment. It includes, but is not limited to, the following areas: validation of assessment, assessment submission, assessment marking, feedback on assessment, boards of examiners, communicating results, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints, quality assurance, assessment regulation management.

I am particularly interested in individuals who have experienced a university-wide change to an aspect of assessment administration in the last 5 years.

What is the time commitment?

The research will involve an in-depth semi-structured interview (approximately 2 hours), which will be scheduled in November and December 2019, subject to availability. These will be scheduled at your place of work, or at a mutually convenient location.

There will also be a preparatory activity to undertake in advance of the interview, which may take you up to an hour to complete.

How do I volunteer?

If you are interested in taking part in this research, please email charlotte.verney@nottingham.ac.uk

I will then provide you with:

- ·A Participant Information Sheet which contains further information about the research and your participation in it for you to read
- ·A link to an online questionnaire for you to provide some additional details about your career experience and current role to help me select my final participants.

Please do feel free to forward this request to relevant colleagues who may be interested in taking part, including those who may have senior or middle management faculty-based roles with responsibility for assessment administration.

I will also be distributing the request on the ARC Assessment Practitioners mail list

Kind regards

Charlotte Verney
Professional Doctorate Student, School of Education, University of Nottingham
Assistant Director (Registry), Canterbury Christ Church University

Invitation to complex selection questionnaire

Email Subject: Information on the research

Postgraduate Research Study: Understanding and conceptualizing the roles and responsibilities of university administrators in assessment work in UK higher education

Dear XXXX

Thank you for expressing an interest in taking part in this research study, which forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Education.

I have attached a document which sets out further information on the research, and what your participation will involve. Please read this document.

I am looking to identify a small number of participants, with diverse experiences in the sector. In order to do this, I am asking those interested to provide me with some further details on their current role and previous work experience to help me select my final participants. I then hope to confirm selected participants later this month.

If you would still like to be considered as a participant for this research, please could you complete the short online questionnaire (it should take no more than 15 minutes)?
https://canterbury.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/administrative-assessment-work-participant-selection1

The password to access the questionnaire is: OCT2019AAW

The information provided through this questionnaire, to inform my participant selection, will also form part of the research process; you will therefore be asked to confirm in the final part of the online questionnaire that you are happy for the information provided to form part of the research data. This will be anonymised.

If you have any questions about the research, please do not hesitate to ask
I hope that you would still like to take part in the research

Charlotte
Professional Doctorate Student, School of Education, University of Nottingham
Assistant Director (Registry), Canterbury Christ Church University

Appendix 2: Participant selection questionnaire

The following pages include screenshots from the online participant selection questionnaire.

Administrative Assessment Work - Participant Selection Questionnaire

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Page 1: Invitation to Participate in Research

Postgraduate Research Study: University administrators and assessment work in UK higher education

Researcher: Charlotte Verney

Thank you for expressing an interest in taking part in this research study, which forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Education.

I am looking to identify a small number of participants, with diverse experiences in the sector. In order to do this, I am asking those interested to provide me with some further details through this short questionnaire, in relation to their current role and previous work experience to help me select my final participants.

The information provided through this survey, to inform my participant selection, will also form part of the research process; you will therefore be asked to confirm in the final part of the online survey that you are happy for the information provided to form part of the research data. This will be anonymised.

Next >

Finish later

Page 2: Page 1 - Your Personal Data

Some personal data is requested to inform the selection of participants.

This data will be used to inform the selection of participants. Once your research data has been generated, anonymised data will be retained. Personal characteristics will remain associated with the data (age, gender) if provided.

If you are not selected for the research, you will be asked to provide further confirmation that your personal details can be retained to be included in further related research or an expanded sample. If you do not provide further confirmation, your personal details will not be retained beyond 1st July 2020.

1. Please provide your full name [Last Name, First Name] * *Required*

2. Please provide a contact email address * *Required*

3. Please select your gender * *Required*

Please select

4. Please identify your age range * *Required*

- ○ Under 25
- ○ 25-34
- ○ 35-44
- ○ 45-54
- ○ 55-64
- ○ Over 65

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Next ›

Finish later

Administrative Assessment Work - Participant Selection Questionnaire

28% complete

Page 3: Page 2 - Your Current Position

5. What is your current Job Title? * *Required*

6. What is the name of the Directorate / Department / Service that you currently work in? (e.g. Academic Services) * *Required*

7. What is the name of the Higher Education Institution that you currently work for? * *Required*

8. What is the Mission Group of the Higher Education Institution that you currently work for? (if known) * *Required*

Please select

9. When did you take up your current position? * *Required*

Dates need to be in the format 'DD/MM/YYYY', for example 27/03/1980.

(dd/mm/yyyy)

10. When did you start working at your current Higher Education Institution in any role? * *Required*

Dates need to be in the format 'DD/MM/YYYY', for example 27/03/1980.

(dd/mm/yyyy)

11. What is the reporting line of your current position to the Academic Registrar (or equivalent)? * *Required*

- ○ I am the Academic Registrar (or equivalent)
- ○ I report directly to the Academic Registrar (or equivalent)
- ○ I have one reporting layer between my position and the Academic Registrar (or equivalent)
- ○ I have more than one reporting layer between my position and the Academic Registrar (or equivalent)
- ○ My position is not in the reporting line of the Academic Registrar (or equivalent)
- ○ I do not know

12. In your own words, please describe your current functional areas of responsibility (e.g. registry, quality, faculty administration, policy, governance)

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Finish later

Page 4: Page 3 - Your Current Position (assessment-related work)

13. Are you involved in any formal committees or working groups within your current Higher Education Institution that consider assessment-related activities? * *Required*

Please select

14. Are you involved in any committees or working groups in the sector (external to your university) that consider assessment-related activities? * *Required*

Please select

15. Based on your knowledge of the sector, is there anything related to assessment administration (e.g. policy, process, procedures) that you deem to be unique or rare in relation to your role and responsibilities in your current position? If so, please give brief details.

16. Based on your knowledge of the sector, is there anything related to assessment administration (e.g. policy, process, procedures) that you deem to be innovative practice within your university? If so, please give brief details.

17. Has your Higher Education Institution made a university-wide change in relation to an aspect of assessment in the last 5 years? If so, what was the change?

More info

‹ Previous

Next ›

Page 5: Page 4 - Your Current Position (continued)

This part of the survey uses a table of questions, view as separate questions instead?

18. Please rank the following assessment-related activities to indicate your level of involvement with the different activities in your current role * *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 10 answer(s).

	1 - very involved	2	3	4	5 - rarely involved
Academic Appeals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assessment Data (MI, Statutory Reporting)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assessment Regulations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assessment Policy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assessment Practice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assessment Procedures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Boards of Examiners	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Coursework submission	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Curriculum Approval	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Extenuating / Mitigating Circumstances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feedback to students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feedback from students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Formal Examinations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mark Entry	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Modifications to Assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Official Results	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student System Set Up	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Finish later

Page 6: Page 5 - Your Career Experience

19. How many years in total would you say that you have been involved in work that has supported student assessment in higher education? * *Required*

Please select

20. How many UK universities have you worked in, where you are familiar with their operations in relation to supporting student assessment? * *Required*

Please select

21. What other positions have you held in the last 10 years / or last 3 positions? (Please provide the Job Title and name of the Organisation) * *Required*

22. Which sector networks have you been part of?

- ☐ AHUA
- ☐ ARC - Academic Registrar's Council
- ☐ ARC Assessment Practitioners
- ☐ ARC SROC
- ☐ ARC Quality Practitioners
- ☐ ARC Student Casework
- ☐ ARC Postgraduate
- ☐ ARC Timetabling
- ☐ AUA
- ☐ HESPA
- ☐ JISC
- ☐ Quality Strategy Network
- ☐ SEDA
- ☐ Systems User Networks (e.g. student record system, CRM)

a. Are there other external networks that you are currenlty part of?

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Page 7: Page 6 - Permission for the use of data

23. The data you have provided will inform my selection of interview participants for my research. If you are not identified for interview, the data you have provided may also be used in an anonymised form as part of the research process. Please confirm whether you are happy for the information provided to form part of the research data even if you are not selected for interview. This will be anonymised.

- ○ I give my permission for the anonymised data I have provided to be used even if I do not take part in the interview research
- ○ I do not give my permission for the anonymised data I have provided to be used if I do not take part in the interview research. My responses should be deleted once participants have been selected.

< Previous

Finish ✔

Finish later

Appendix 3: Participant information sheet

Postgraduate Research Study: University administrators and assessment work in UK higher education

Researcher: Charlotte Verney

You are being invited to be involved in this research study, which forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Education.

Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with your line manager if you wish. Please contact me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

Research Aims:

This research aims to understand the roles and responsibilities of UK university administrators. It is a exploring the roles of administrators in supporting the core academic activity of assessment, from the perspective of senior and middle managers working in this area. It is hoped that the study will contribute to the emerging research area on university administrators, and more broadly on the nature of higher education work.

It is anticipated that the data generated from this research and its findings, will be presented at academic conferences and published in journals, as well as forming part of the research thesis.

Requirements of Participants:

Participants must have appropriate experience in relation to "assessment work" in UK higher education. This is defined very broadly to encompass many aspects of administration, systems, policy, regulations, strategy relating to areas of work that support student assessment. It includes, but is not limited to the following areas: validation of assessment, assessment submission, marking, feedback on assessment, boards of examiners, communicating results, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints, quality assurance, regulation management.

Participation in this research will involve:

i) Provision of some personal and career-related data to inform the participant selection through an online questionnaire. This data will be anonymised when it forms part of the research data.

For participants selected:

ii) **Disclosure of your current official job description;**

iii) **A pre-interview preparatory activity** - a reflective activity creating a 'role map' of key individuals and roles that you work with to undertake your responsibilities in relation to assessment [further guidance on how to complete this will be provided];

iv) **A face-to-face one-to-one interview;**
The interview will draw on the preparatory activity and follow a semi structured interview pattern. The interviews may be fairly in-depth, and are expected to take between approximately 2 hours.

You may also be invited to participate in further activities related to this research, if you give permission for your contact details to be retained.

Benefits of Participation

Participation in this research will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your professional practice, your experiences of undertaking administrative work in relation to assessment, and to express your views on a range of issues associated with your work. This will include, but is not restricted to:

- Your work background in supporting assessment administration in universities;
- The tasks that you, your team(s) or other administrative teams at your university undertake;
- The people and roles that you work with;
- Your experience of undertaking your role;
- Sector or university debates and challenges related to assessment.

The interviews will be audio-recorded, and later transcribed into text form by a professional transcription service. You will be provided with a copy of the transcribed interview and given the opportunity to amend it for accuracy.

Your 'role map' created in advance of the interview will form part of the research data and will be photographed at the start of the interview. It will be re-photographed at the end of the interview if amendments are made to it during the interview process.

Anonymity/Participation:

<u>For participants not selected</u>
An anonymised copy of your online questionnaire will be retained for the duration of the research study.

As part of the presentation of results, your own words in the survey may be used in text form. Your contribution will be anonymised and a pseudonym assigned. Any other traceable details will be removed in any reported data. This will ensure that you cannot be identified from what you said.

Your personal details will be retained for the purpose of inviting you to engage in further research, only if you give permission for this.

All of the research data will be stored in a secure place in a separate, password- protected file from any data supplied.

<u>For participants selected</u>
In addition to the above:

A full, anonymised transcript will be created as early as possible in the research process. As part of the presentation of results, your own words from the interview transcript may be used in text form. Your contribution will be anonymised and a pseudonym assigned. Any other traceable details will be removed in any reported data. This will ensure that you cannot be identified from what you said.

All of the research data will be stored in a secure place in a separate, password- protected file from any data supplied.

Please note that:

- **You can decide to stop your participation in the research at any point, including during the interview.**
- **You need not answer questions that you do not wish to.**
- **Your name will be removed from the information and anonymised.**

It should not be possible to identify anyone from my reports on this study. It is up to you to decide whether to take part or not.

If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw during the interview or any time and without giving a reason. If you withdraw from the study all data will be withdrawn and destroyed. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be made available by the researcher upon application. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences and journals.

If this study has harmed you in any way you can contact the University of Nottingham using the details below for further advice and information: Supervisor's Name: Professor Monica McLean Email: monica.mclean@nottinghm.ac.uk

The contact details of the Research Ethics Coordinator should participants wish to make a complaint on ethical grounds are: educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Creating a role map

The following instructions were provided in advance of the interview.

Pre-Interview Activity – Creating a Role Map

One of the areas I want to explore with you when we meet, is the range of people you engage with as part of your role in supporting student assessment.

As preparation for this discussion, I would like you to produce a diagram, or multiple diagrams, of your network(s) of people that you interact with as part of your role.

Please produce this on A3 paper and bring it with you to the interview. This will be used as the basis for discussion in part of the interview, and can be updated during the interview if you feel it is appropriate to do so. The role map(s) will be photographed at the start and end of the interview and form part of the research data.

What do I mean by 'interaction'?

Individuals (e.g. Head of School) or work units (e.g. Exams Office) who you engage with as part of your role; this might be through:

- Receiving information, training, guidance in any form (verbally, email, handbooks)
- Giving information, training, guidance (verbally, email, handbooks)
- Discussions, meetings, other activities

Who should be included in the map?

Please consider the inclusion of the following:

- Are there individuals/teams within your department to include?
- Are there individuals/departments outside your department but within the university to include?
- Are there individuals/organisations outside your university to include?
- Do you interact with students?
- Are there others?

You might also find it helpful to imagine you were creating this document for someone who is going to be doing your role in the future – who do they need to make contact with/build relationships with, in order to be successful in the role?

Key working relationships

If possible, please distinguish between those individuals or units who you determine to be key interactions for your role in relation to assessment. You may like to assign them a specific colour or mark them in some way.

Format of the Map

There is no set format for the map, so please design the role map in a way that is meaningful to you.

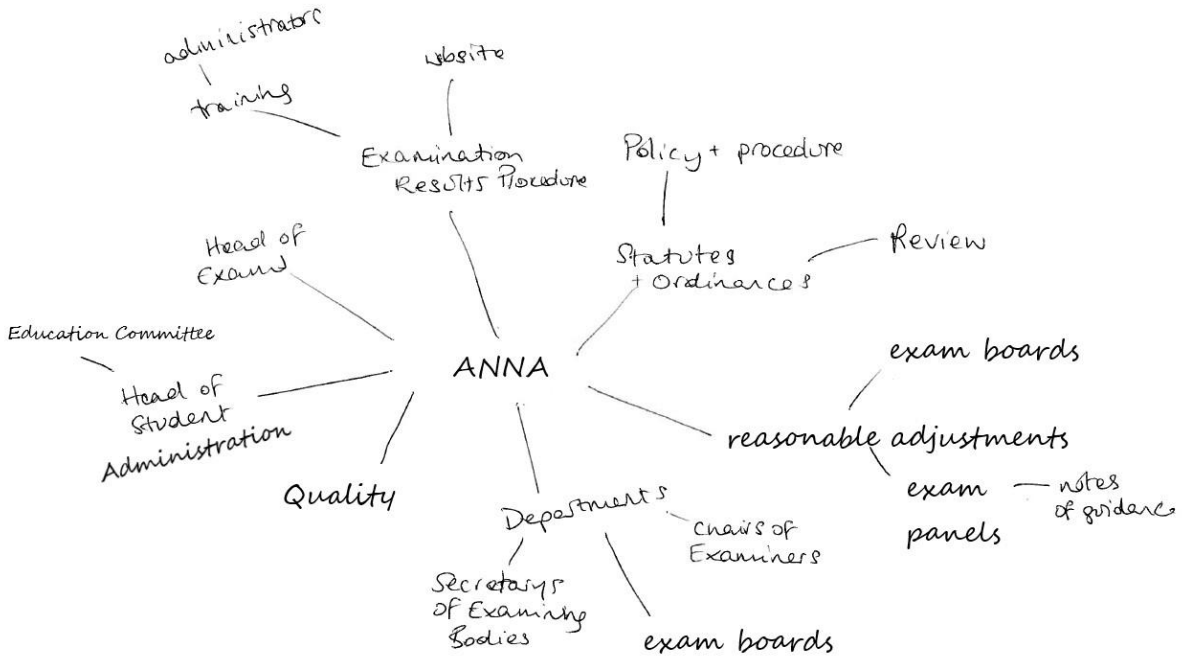
There is no limit to the number of individuals or work units that you can include. You may create multiple maps for different groups of interactions if this is helpful. Or multiple maps if you have recently held different roles in relation to assessment.

When including individuals, you can include their first name or initial or their job title as you understand it. Please do not include full names.

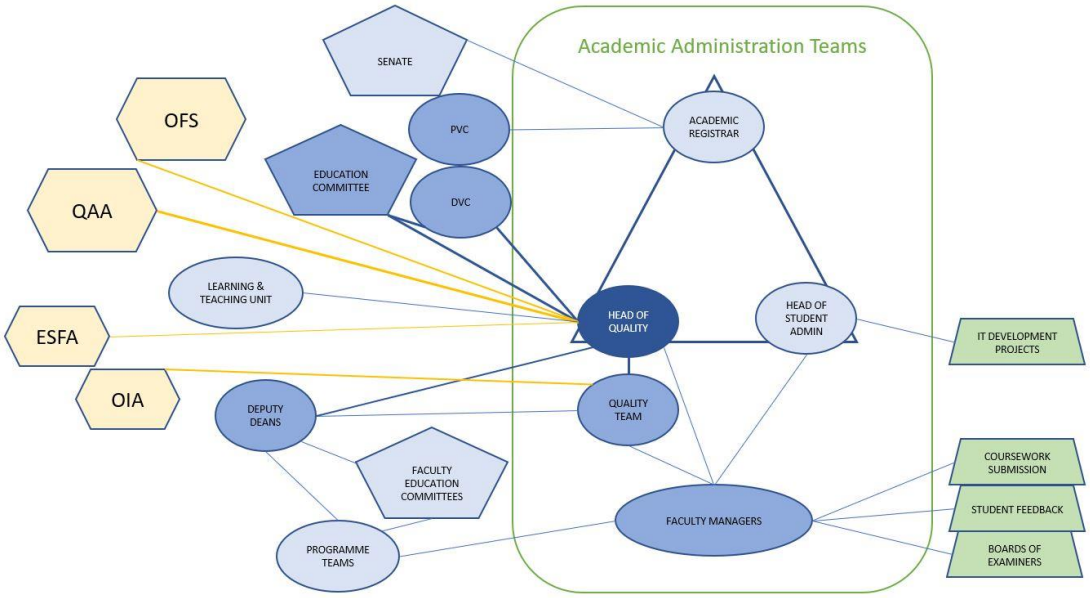
Appendix 5: Role maps

The following role maps have been redacted to ensure anonymity with some words removed or replaced. I have not included a role map for Hayley, as this was not created as part of the pilot interview. Presented in alphabetical order by pseudonym.

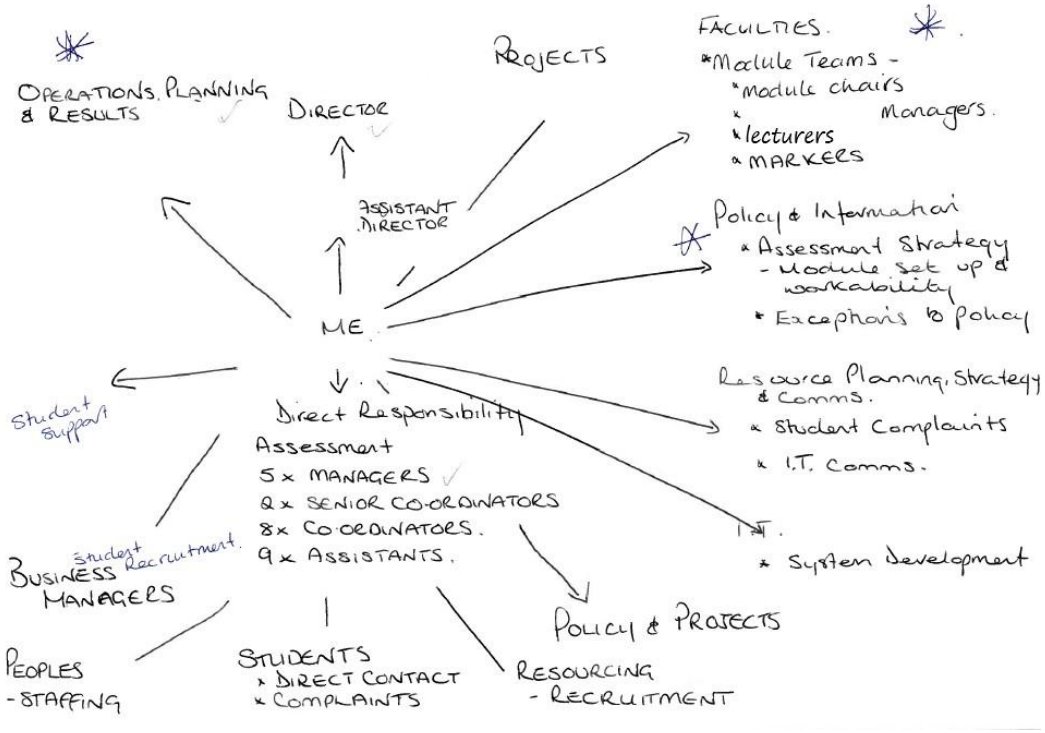
Role map: Anna (redacted)



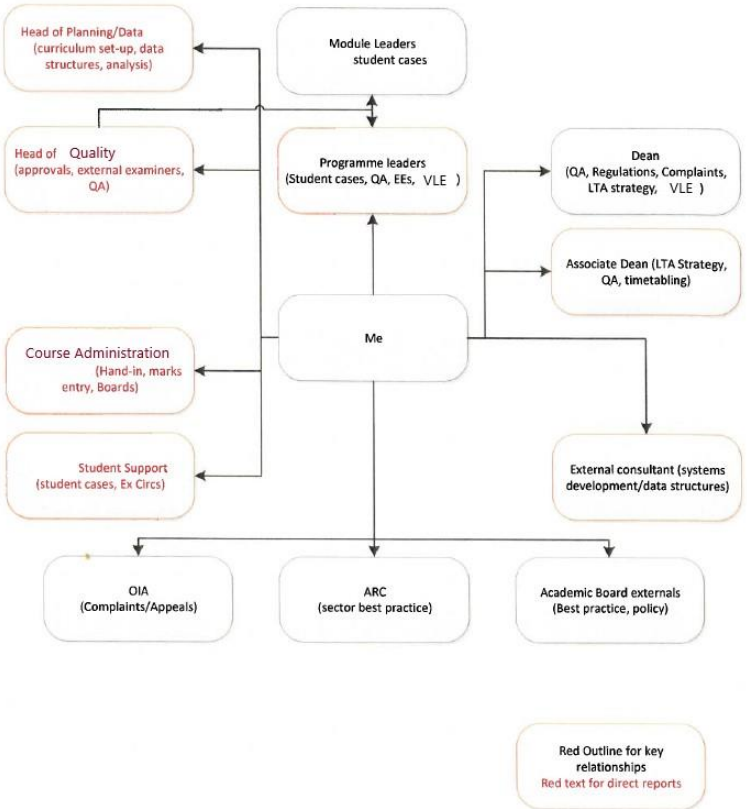
Role map: Brian (created by CV)



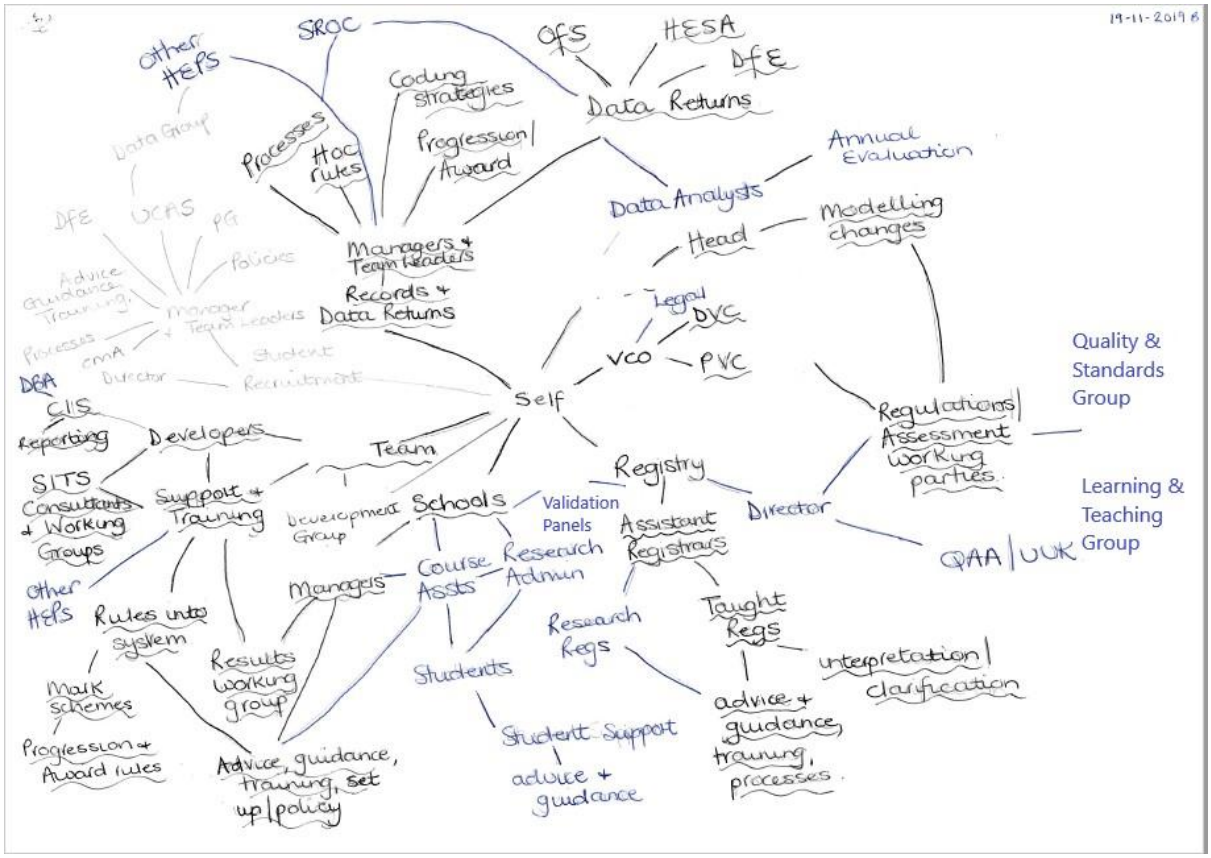
Role map: Carol (redacted)



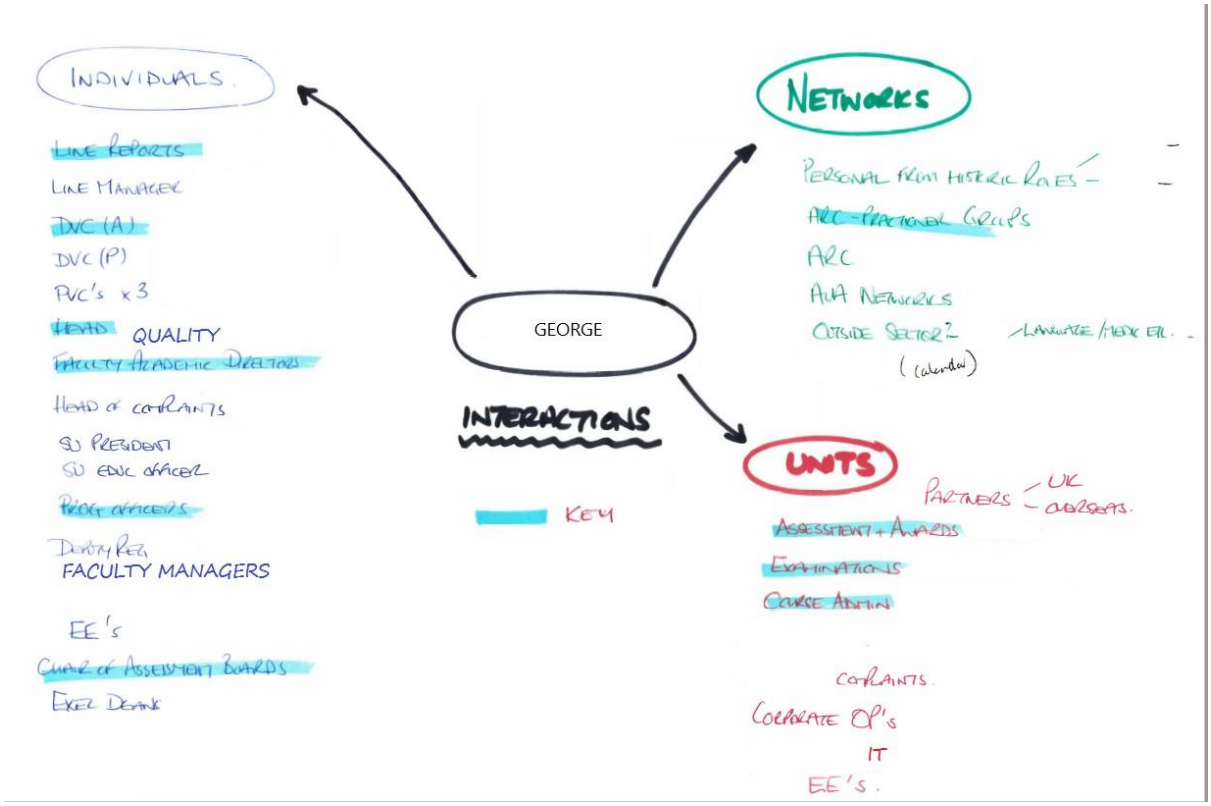
Role map: David (redacted)



Role map: Esther (redacted)

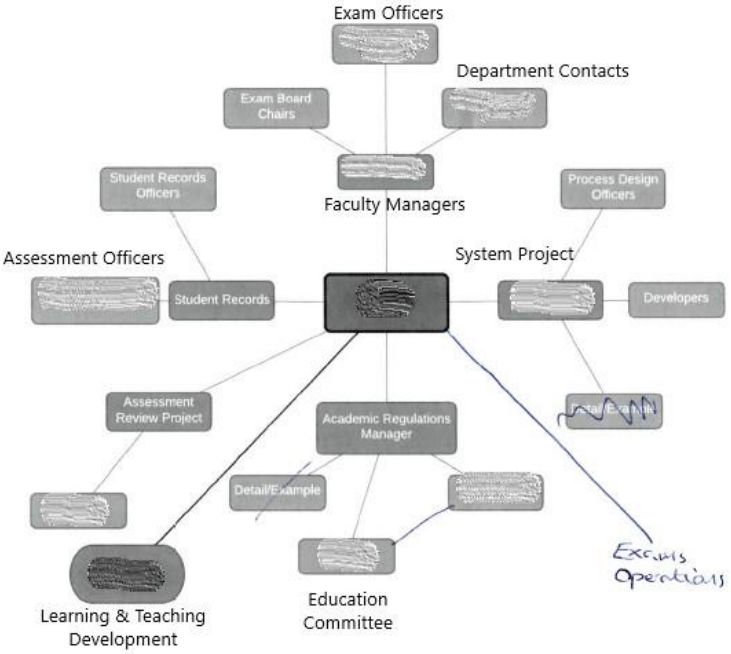


Role map: George (redacted)

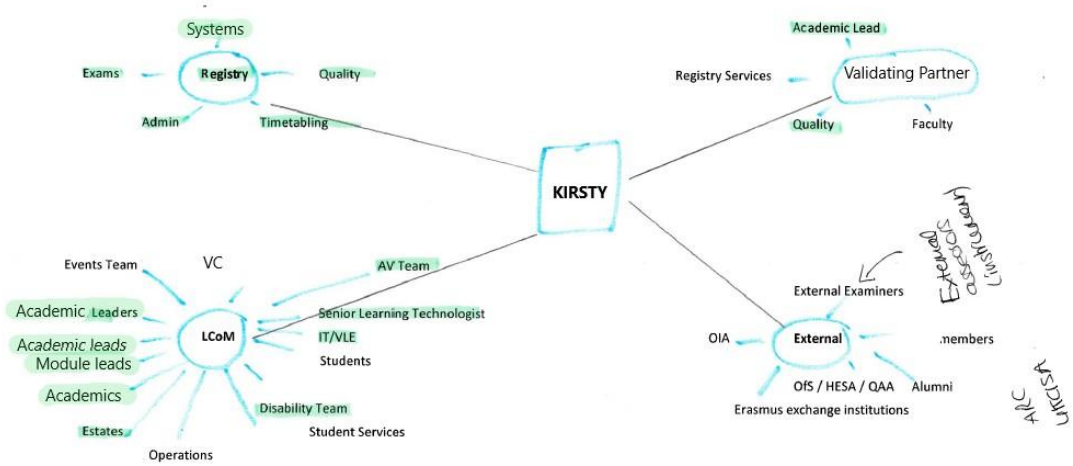


Role map: Janet (redacted)

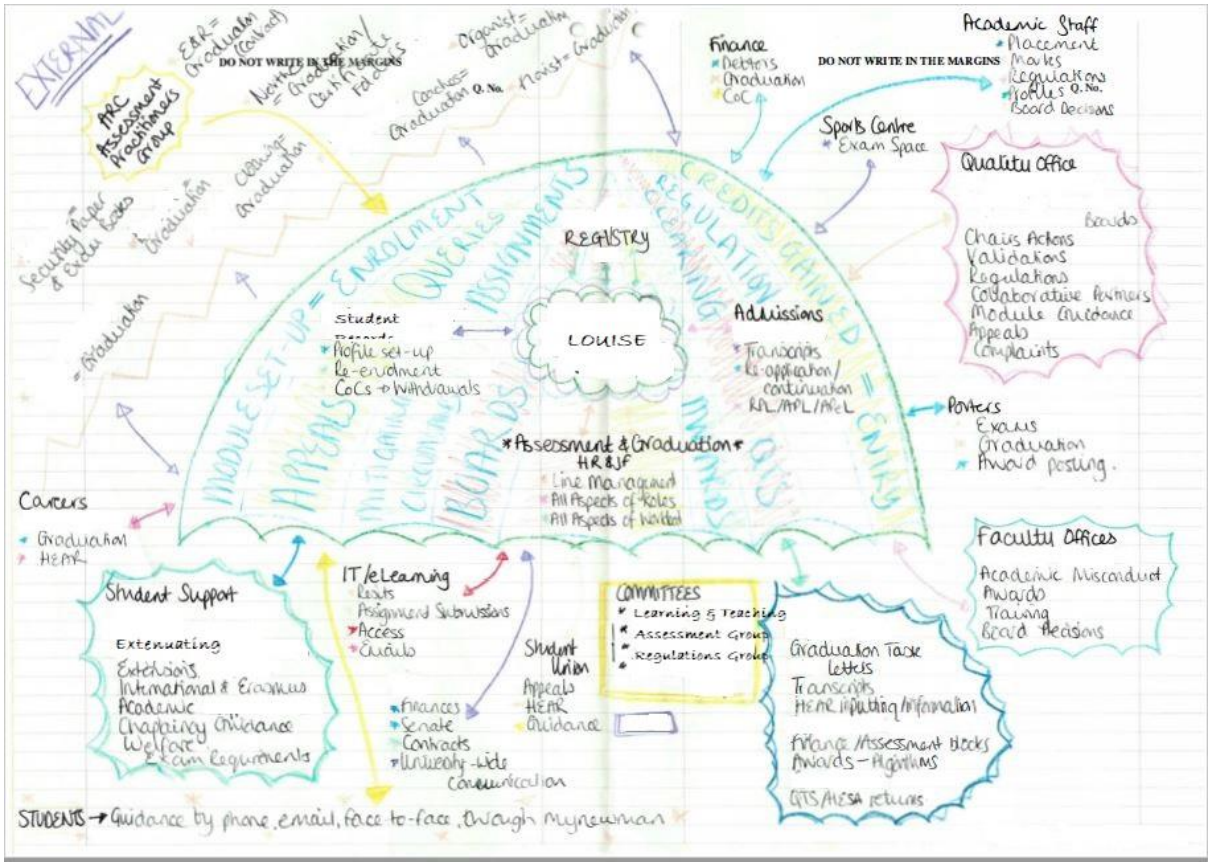
This map included an annotation that was made during the interview process to include "exam operations" which Janet had forgot to include when initially creating the map.



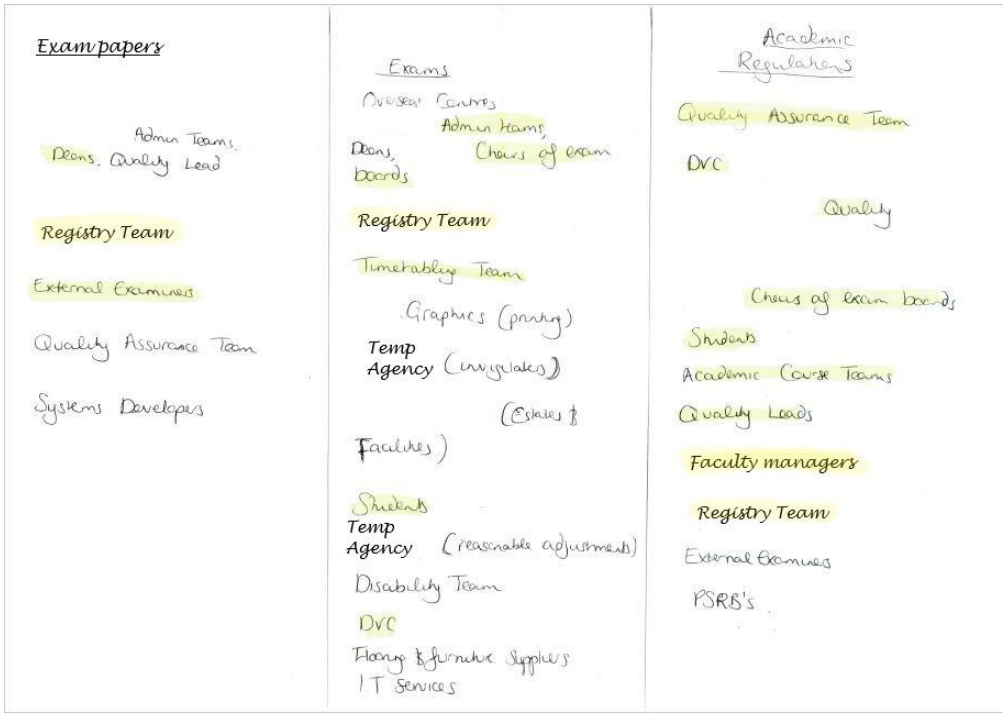
Role map: Kirsty (redacted)



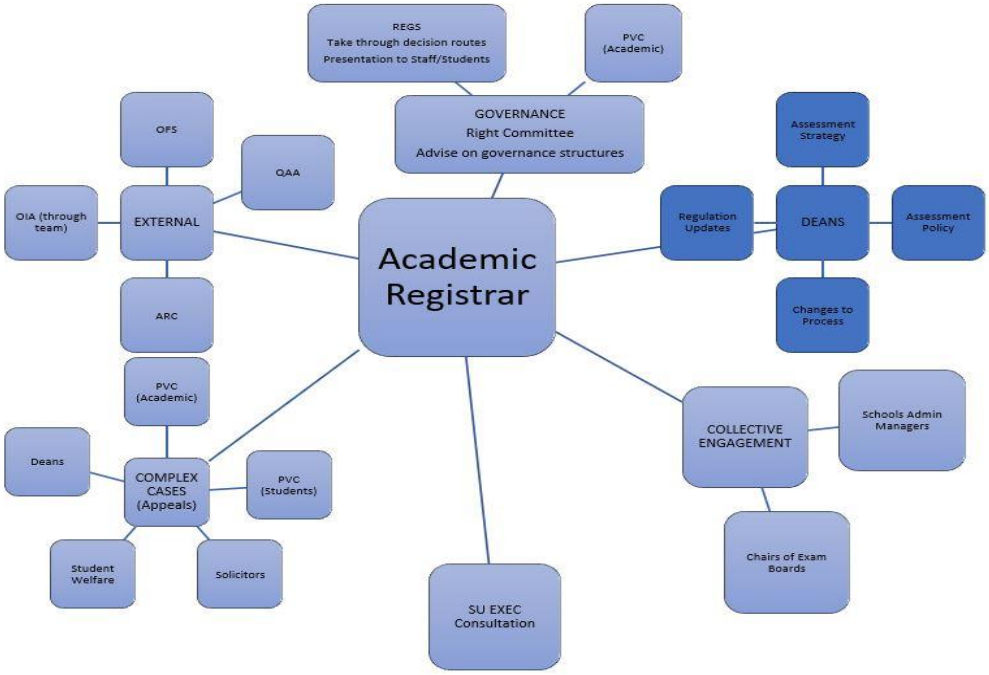
Role map: Louise (redacted)



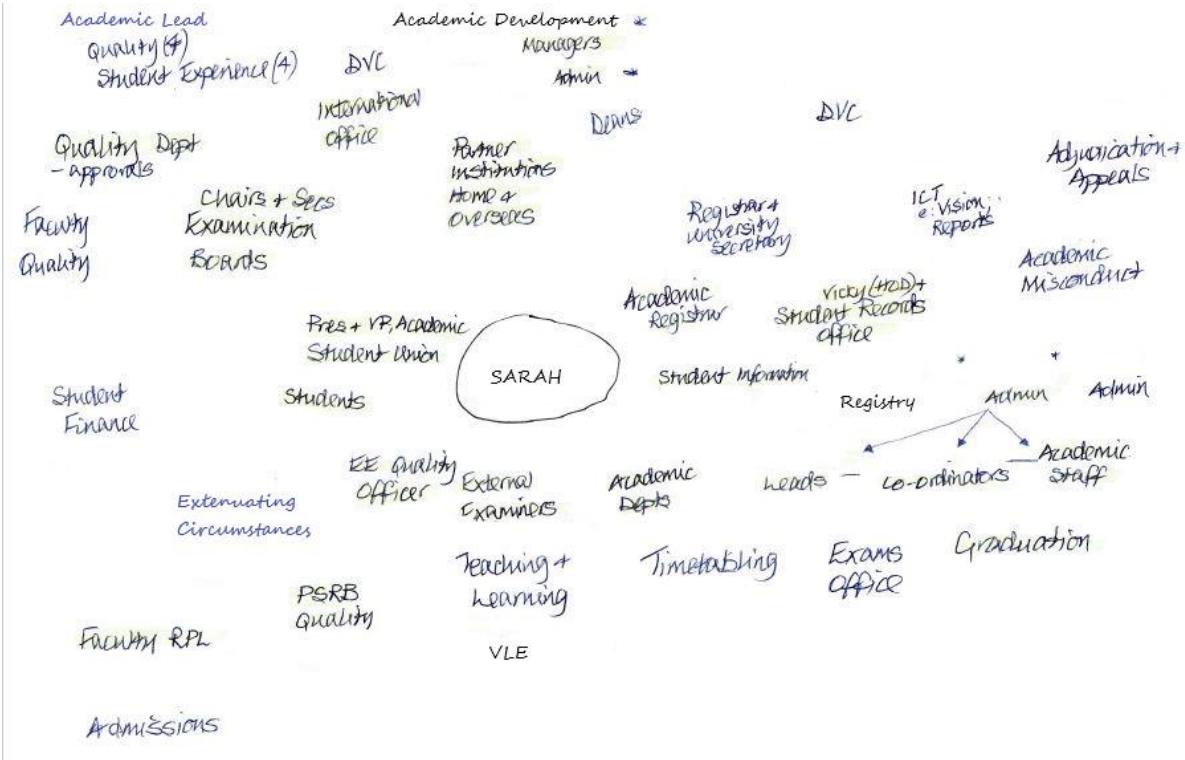
Role map: Michelle



Role map: Peter (created by CV)



Role map: Sarah (redacted)



Appendix 6: Interview topic guide

Topic Guide: 2 hour semi-structured interview

[Job description would have been provided in advance]

1. **Can you describe for me how you have been involved in assessment?**
   Follow up clarifications, points of interest or questions about their circumstances

   These questions asked specifically, but after there has been general discussion of the areas of work and follow up descriptions
   a. **What are the most challenging aspects of your work in assessment?**
   b. **What are the most rewarding aspects of your work in assessment?**
   c. **What is the purpose of your role / why is it important?**

2. **Can you talk me through your role map(s)?**
   Follow up questions about how they work with individuals, the sorts of activities, boundaries, tensions etc depending on what is discussed. The discussion tends to move around the different roles identified on the map in turn, with more detailed discussion as appropriate.
   a. **Who do you most closely with?**
   b. **Which roles/areas impact your work?**
      Not always asked explicitly

3. **Thinking about a specific area of institutional change in relation to assessment, can you talk me through the change process and your role in it?**
   This often takes place during discussion of the role map

4. **Are there areas of assessment where you make decisions?**
   Changed to be more explicit about their own decision making, as examples of where decisions are made are drawn out trough earlier discussions, so this more direct question felt more appropriate

5. **Is your role in assessment ever unclear?**
   Not always asked

6. **Can you talk me through how extenuating circumstances operates at your university?**
   Not always asked explicitly as it comes out in discussion often. Not asked if there is insufficient time or if their role is not involved in ECs.

7. **What do you think are they key challenges in relation to assessment at your university?**
   a. **What do you see your role in resolving these challenges?**

8. **How has the work in the administration of assessment changed?**

9. **How do you think assessment administration might change in the next five years?**

10. **Is there anything more that you would like to share about your role or administrative work in supporting assessment ?**

Appendix 7: Data analysis process illustrations

Illustration A: Extract of initial analysis notes during the data generation phase. Extract from Janet, Senior Manager, Specialist in Regulations

Methodological Considerations

At one point in the interview Janet was about to give an example and then said 'I hope that this is very confidential' – I reassured Janet that what she said would be confidential, and explained that she would see a copy of the transcript and if at that point she decided she wanted something removed, she could choose to do so. In that particular example, Janet clarified verbally what she would be happy to be directly cited in relation to the example given.

For future interviews, I will make sure that I emphasise before the interview begins that it is their choice what they do disclose, and that they will see the transcript and can request something is removed at that stage if they wish. This felt important given the nature of the interviews.

Individuals and abbreviations used frequently – these will be anonymised in the transcript. Even committees might need to be renamed as generic.

Impressions of Janet

Janet appeared well-engaged in her organisation and her work, knowledgeable, comfortable in detail, consulted on changes, had a good grasp of the bigger picture, positioned 'good processes' in the context of releasing academics to focus on academic aspects.

Illustration B: Extract of an individual summary from Esther, Senior Manager, Specialist in Systems & Data

Area covered	Description	Codes / Themes from this example
Registry	Is more on the quality side of things. They do award ceremonies and formal exams, regulations, appeals and complaints. But they don't have student records or assessment. They have a compliance role in exam boards, as they attend some to observe. "we have had occasions with Schools…coming out with decisions that weren't actually in the regulations, and so they were not allowed to have a Board unless a member of Registry was there" Esther works more closely with Assistant Registrars (quality, Regulations, Research) now, but in the past, with a previous post-holder, she worked more closely with the Head of Registry. Esther says this is because more is delegated and maintains a more strategic overview; the previous Head would have been a key contact on a map before. Esther is more involved with taught regulations than research. Esther was aware of sector issues related to quality and would look to the registry to understand what those sector changes might mean for their institution so that Esther could adapt processes or systems if needed. It might also be that Esther and her teams act as a conduit for queries about regulations that come from the Schools. "Yeah, because sometimes they would just come to the SYSTEM team, and the SYSTEM team would think, well actually that's more a regulatory issue, we need to refer that on. We can look at the regulations, and we know what the rules are in the system and we know that those are right, but there's a slight interpretation that's needed there, or clarification, and Registry, because they are the keepers of the regulations, they would be the people to answer that." Esther appeared to have a clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities and boundaries between her team and the registry. And the Registry team are very good, in Esther's view of understanding changes cannot be made in isolation and there are knock-on consequences to understand. They can be 'a voice of reason' on some working groups. And are strong allies for the central team.	Rogue academics Role holder influences relationship Advice and interpretation of external issues Two-way advice and guidance

Illustration C: Extract of initial assessment decision log

Interview	Type	Decision or Change Example	Summary of Decision Activity or Change	Administrator Involvement in the Decision or Change Include summary of the participant's role in the decision or change any perceptions they have about their involvement or the involvement of others
Peter	Everyday	External Examiners	External examiner appointment	Peter's team influence some appointments if they do not meet the criteria for example
David	Everyday	External Examiners	A decision on a response to an external examiner report	David will authorise institutional responses to external examiners in his capacity as Chair of the elevant quality committee - which is part of his remit as Academic Registrar
Brian	Everyday	External Examiners	A decision on external examiners	Brian has ultimate authority to confirm these appointments as Head of Quality

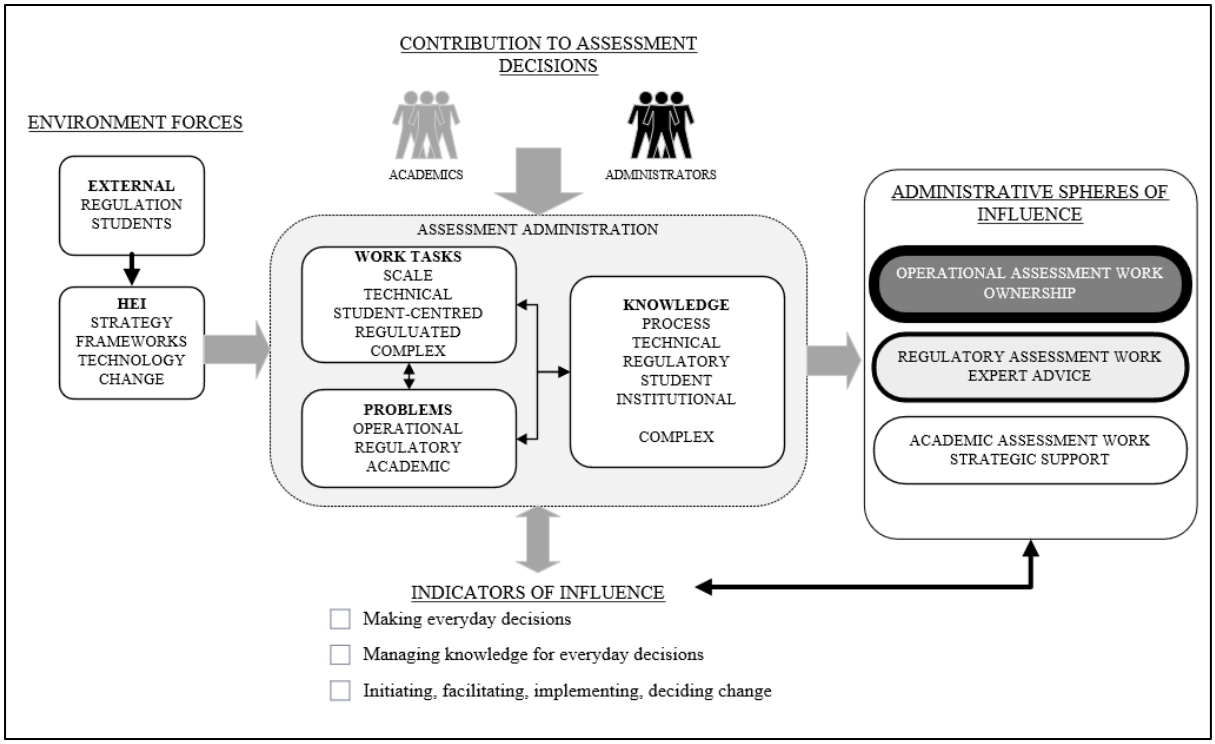
Illustration D: Dominant descriptor of individual's work

	Dominant Description	Observations on this account of their own role
HAYLEY	**Delivering Operations** Resolving issues and improving practice	Hayley's account of her role was very descriptive about the work of her and her teams; where she often did not draw a distinction. She had a wealth of experience in formal examinations which is a more hands-on and operational area of assessment work, therefore the dominance of description related to the actual delivery of operations is to be expected.
BRIAN	**Resolving issues and improving practice**	Brian's account of his role was dominant in relation to resolving issues and improving practice due to his responsibilities for policy work, which is strategic in nature, setting direction, his ability to contribute to university-wide decisions about future policy, and his descriptions of his responsibilities for managing and highlighting institutional risk – either from a QAA or OFS perspective. He also described his role in enabling institutional change.

Appendix 8: Visual framework

For investigating the system of higher education workers

Figure 4: The outcomes of applying Abbott's system of professions approach to explore changes in authority and influence within assessment administration.



Visual 5: A proposed framework for applying Abbott's system of professions approach to explore changes in authority and influence within higher education.