

Enabling an Inclusive Research Culture for Higher Education Professional Services Researchers

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Abstract

UK higher education institutions employ staff on professional services contracts to fulfil a range of functions, separate to staff employed on academic contracts. There is a sector-wide movement to enhance research culture within higher education institutions, and within this, a growing recognition of the ways that professional services support the sector's core missions of research and teaching. However, there remains little visibility of professional services staff who are actively researching – we call these individuals professional services researchers. This article reports on an exploratory project at a UK University that sought to enable a more inclusive research culture and environment for professional services researchers. It draws on data from semi-structured interviews with key informants within the University to understand the support and resources available to researchers, and an online questionnaire distributed to professional services staff.

We found that the concept of a professional services researcher was not well understood and propose a new conceptual framework to help define professional services researchers and support future research and practice in this space. The lack of conceptual awareness of professional services researchers was creating a research culture where professional services did not feel that their research was valued or recognised, and research support services were difficult to navigate. We make recommendations for how institutions can take practical steps to remove barriers for professional services researchers to make their own research culture more inclusive.

Keywords: professional services; research culture; research support; professional services researchers; higher education

Introduction

Research and teaching are core functions of UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Some HEIs place more emphasis on their research profile (research-intensive), and others on teaching profile (teaching-focused); yet across all HEIs, the act of conducting research is predominantly perceived as the purview of academic staff. Whitchurch (2008) acknowledged the emergence of staff who have a skill set that blends research and administration, and Verney (2025) has reflected on their experiences of developing these two competencies; however, to date, we are not aware of any research that has focused specifically on the act of conducting research as a professional services member of staff in higher education. This article explores the experiences of individuals employed on professional services contracts who conduct research, and the support available to them from University services. We make recommendations for how HEIs can create a more inclusive research culture for professional services researchers.

Professional Services and Research

In the UK, HEIs make a distinction in the type of contracts used for academic roles and professional services roles. We use the term professional services staff to refer to any staff working on a professional services contract, which includes: globally recognised professions such as human resources, finance, IT; individuals delivering a more tailored form of service to the higher education sector, such as research support, teaching administration, student services; and often roles that blend academic and professional competencies such as educational developers, learning technologists, technicians. International research interest in the role of professional services has been steadily increasing in the last two decades (Veles et al, 2023), which has highlighted that professional services contributions, knowledge and expertise are often not visible or recognized within HEIs (Szekeres, 2004; Vere et al, 2024), despite professional services playing an important role in knowledge and infrastructure development (De Jong, 2023; De Jong & Del Junco, 2023).

Studies exploring the role of professional services in the activity of research have initially focused on increasing the understanding, visibility and recognition of the work that professional services staff do to support or enable the research process (Allen-Collinson, 2007; Shelley, 2010; de Jong, 2023). There has since been a recognition that the work of research administration and management has become more specialised (Kerridge et al., 2023) and is increasingly professionalised through its own professional association and qualifications (e.g., ARMA) and specialist networks (e.g., PRISM). New areas of research work have also emerged,

for example, research data management, which bring new actors such as librarians and IT professionals more actively into the research space (**Cox & Verbaan, 2016**). A new occupational group of ‘research enablers’ has also emerged who are:

Staff in universities, research institutes and centres and other research-performing organisations who support the successful delivery, co-ordination and implementation of projects, programmes and strategic initiatives (**Midlands Innovation, 2023: 3**)

In higher education the term research enabler has been used to recognise contributions of a wider group of professional services staff to delivering research, including ‘academic librarians, IT staff, knowledge exchange professionals, technicians, and estates staff’ (**Thorne, 2024: 218**). Sector-wide initiatives such as The Technician Commitment (**2017**) and the Hidden REF (**2023**) have shone a light on the diverse ways that professional services staff contribute to academic research. However, there remains little awareness of the ways that professional services staff undertake research themselves, rather than enabling the research of others.

In the UK many professional services staff have had formal research training before entering HE professional services (**Whitchurch, 2009**), others have completed taught postgraduate programmes whilst working in higher education professional services (**Oztel, 2025**), and some have undertaken doctoral research relating to higher education practice (e.g., **Dowle, 2020; Verney, 2022; Gilani, 2024**). Informal communities of practice have emerged for professional services staff actively researching, and sector organisations are developing more training and resources in evaluation, targeted at both academics and professional services (e.g., TASSO, AdvanceHE). These individuals, among others, use their research skills to explore and enhance their practice; many share their outputs in professional spaces such as conferences (e.g., AHEP, RAISE), and some publish their research in academic journals (e.g., Perspectives).ⁱ While evaluative criteria often used to define and assess the pay grades of professional services roles include ‘research and analysis’ (**University of Oxford, 2025**), the acts of engaging with academic and practitioner research to inform practice, creating new knowledge, and disseminating that knowledge, are not widely recognised as core elements of professional services work in higher education. This may mean that they do not feel included in their institution’s research culture, and echoes narratives in the broader literature on professional staff identity about divides, exclusion and othering (**Allen-Collinson, 2006; Caldwell, 2022, 2024**).

Research Culture in UK Higher Education

In the UK, the narrative of enhancing research culture has emerged from the evolution of the exercises used to assess the quality of research; initially the Research Assessment Exercise, and since 2014, the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The assessment of the quality of research is distinct from the assessment of the quality of teaching through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The research assessments have typically placed a high value on the volume of high-quality research outputs, with the outcome of REF guiding the allocation of around two billion pounds of funding a year (**REF2029, 2023b**). This approach has unintentionally contributed to a culture within HEI's where research outputs are perceived to be more highly valued than other activities such as teaching, leadership and administration (**Deem & Lucas, 2007; McKinley et al, 2021; REF2029a**), and research prestige is often used to bolster claims of teaching excellence (**Matthews & Kotzee, 2022**).

Each cycle of research assessment has represented a shift in approach and/or focus. Following the first REF cycle in 2014, HEIs were encouraged to broaden their definition of research and impact, for example, being encouraged to include impact case studies related to pedagogical research (**Stern, 2016**). Following the second cycle in 2021, there was an increased recognition that the REF has the potential to support the delivery of a more positive impact on cultural change within HEIs. For example, there was a shift from assessing 'research environment' which was weighted at 15%, to assessing 'people, culture and environment', weighted 25%, which has encouraged HEIs to consider the contributions of everyone in research including technical and professional services staff. Following REF2021, research culture and the development of people were recognised as critical enablers to a thriving research environment, and priorities identified to deliver an inclusive and respectful culture, recognition and reward of all the people and activities that lead to excellent research and innovation, ending of bullying and harassment, enabling people to feel confident to engage with and contribute to research and innovation, and frameworks, assessment and incentives to promote these (**BEIS, 2021**).

For REF2029, a stronger emphasis on people and culture is being explored (**REF2029a, 2023**), and Research England has already awarded 30 million pounds to Higher Education Providers, to enhance research culture (**UKRI, 2022**). These changes, which have not come without debate (**Curry, 2023**), have driven HEIs to focus on enhancing careers and improving culture in research. HEIs have interpreted improving research culture in a variety of ways, with some examples including Research Culture Awards rewarding collaboration, leadership mentorship and recognising the role of Early Career Researchers & professional services staff (Norman and Bradley,

2024) or developing a work experience strategy to increase interest from young people in STEM (**Carnegie & Ogunkola, 2024**) or considering improvements in practice such as additional support for dyslexic staff or well-being training (**REF2021, 2022**). The University of Bristol (UoB) has focussed Research Culture activities around five guiding principles: promoting openness and transparency in the way we work, empowering staff and students through effective management at all levels, providing a range of stable career options for those who enable and deliver research, embedding diversity into those who deliver research and encouraging internal and external collaboration and innovation. Examples of these activities include a guide on how to acknowledge technicians in research papers, establishing a research managers and administrators network and raising awareness of the work of professional services staff in enabling others' researchers.

The Research Project

This project arose from the experiences of the authors, who are two professional services staff at the University of Bristol (UoB), who encountered challenges navigating the research process. UoB is a research-intensive University, and a member of the Russell Group; a group that produces more than two-thirds of the world-leading research in the UK (**The Russell Group, 2024**). The University awarded Research England funding to this project, which aimed to contribute to the initiative's strategic goals around embedding diversity, by creating a more inclusive environment for professional services staff who are actively researching. It sought to identify practical recommendations for UoB that could support professional services researchers, framed by the overarching research question: how can the University support an inclusive environment where professional services staff can conduct research? The project was guided by further sub-questions: What research activities are being conducted by professional services? What support, and recognition is available to professional services colleagues conducting research? What are the barriers and benefits to professional services colleagues in conducting research?

Following ethical approval from the Faculty of Social Science and Law ethics committee, data was generated in two phases. In the first phase we identified the key steps of the research process, and then identified members of University staff who had expert knowledge about how one or more of the key steps operated at the University. We conceptualised these experts as key informants (**Macfarlan, 2022**) and invited them to take part in an individual or joint interview with colleagues. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews, gaining insight from 18 key informants. The interviews provided insight into ethical approval, research data

management, research support, research funding, research contracts, managing research finances, research training and development, research strategy, research skills, career development, research projects.

The second phase aimed to identify professional services researchers within the University and understand their individual experiences of undertaking research and accessing support at the University. Due to timing and resource constraints, instead of conducting further interviews, an online questionnaire was used, to generate initial insights from those who self-identified as using research approach in their work, using the following description:

We are adopting a broad definition of 'research approaches' that involves undertaking planned and systematic activities that provide reliable ways to learn and deepen our understanding of a particular issue. This includes, but is not limited to, academic research, sector research, market research, user research and evaluation of change.

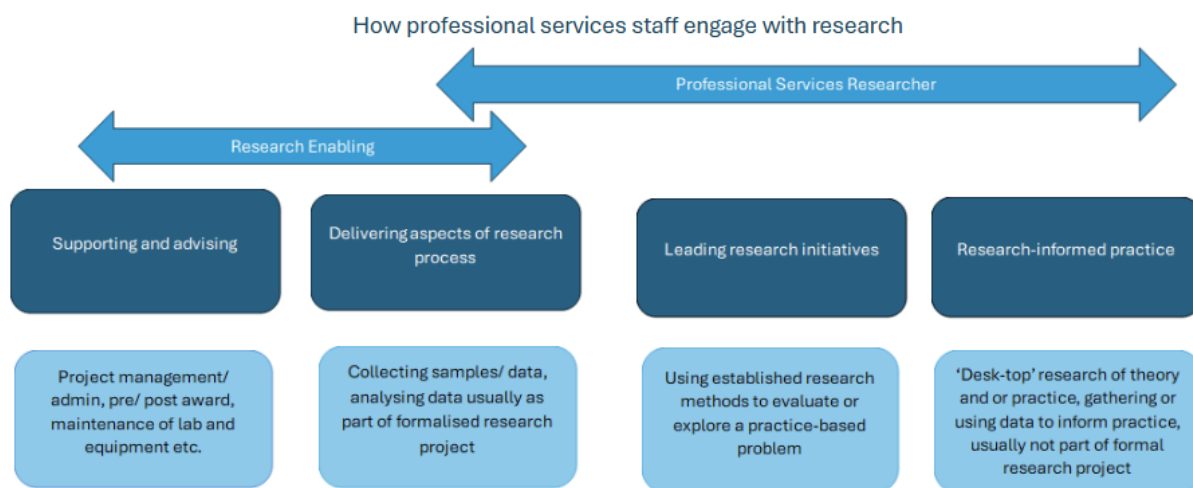
(Authors' Questionnaire)

The questionnaire had six sections, comprising questions with pre-determined options, and some with opportunities for free text. The questionnaire asked about their current role and educational background, research topics and projects, research skills, their experience of doing research as a professional services researcher at Bristol, the research culture, and their interest in future practice sharing. The questionnaire was distributed via email to professional services leaders across the organisation who were asked to cascade the questionnaire. It was also distributed to several established internal networks, and to specific contacts of the researchers who were known to be undertaking research. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous; however, respondents had the option to provide their contact details so that they could be kept informed about the project and participate in future events.

As we moved through data generation and thematic analysis of the key informant interviews, it became clear that the concept of professional staff doing research themselves, rather than supporting or enabling the research process, was not well understood. In many interviews we had to elaborate with examples from our own experience to help the participants, and even those who did understand the concept, felt they had insufficient understanding of what professional services research might look like in practice to be able to offer their full insight. As a result, we developed a working definition to help us articulate the difference between research-enabling professional services staff, and professional services staff actively researching. We define professional services researchers (PSRs) as staff employed in higher education on a professional services contract who are engaged with one or more of the following

activities: delivering research steps, leading research initiatives, research-informed practice. We have also developed a descriptive conceptual framework (Hassan, 2024) to show how professional services researchers may engage with research activities as illustrated in Figure 1. These acts are distinct from supporting and enabling the research of others, although a PSR may also be engaged to support and advise.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for how professional services engage with research.



In this article, we draw on the data from interviews with key informants on the research process, a questionnaire completed by professional services staff using research approaches in their work, and our definition of PSRs to share insights about their experiences and make recommendations for more inclusive practice.

Professional services researchers at the University of Bristol

The questionnaire generated 22 responses, from professional services staff who were based in central professional service departments, in schools, faculties and institutes. The PSRs were undertaking roles in globally recognised professions, tailored higher education service roles, and roles that blend academic and professional competencies. While the data-set is small, the data still provides new insights into the experiences of professional services researchers, particularly their qualifications, contract status, and engagement with research as a PSR.

All respondents held a professional services contract. Three held an academic contract alongside their substantive professional services contract: one for a research project they had been funded for, one for teaching at UoB and one for teaching at another University. The PSRs were highly educated, all having an undergraduate degree, 12 holding postgraduate degrees and a further 6 holding a doctorate. A small number had academic research experience prior to their current professional

services roles, having held positions such as a research assistant (2), lead researcher (3), independent researcher (2), employment in a research facility (1).

Most (18) indicated that they had carried out research as part of their current professional service role, and the remainder had delivered research in previous employment, as part of a project team, as an independent researcher, and/or as a doctoral student. Some (8) respondents described research that related to their educational discipline, predominantly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas, and one in community engagement. These PSRs were primarily 'delivering research steps', often as part of a larger funded project team, where the objective of the research and potential impact was designed to add to the academic and scientific knowledge-base.

A larger set of respondents (14) described research that was related to higher education practice. Most of these PSRs were 'leading research initiatives' combined with 'delivering research steps' and a small number also demonstrated 'research-informed practice'. Much of this research was unfunded, or, funded through their internal divisional budgets, particularly market and user experience research; yet some PSRs had secured funding from internal or external funding rounds. External funders included the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Research Libraries UK, the Association of Research Managers and Administrators, and Research England. PSRs researching higher education practice articulated their goals and potential impact of their research in ways that indicated their research was intended to inform institutional or sector practice, by impacting academic practice, process changes, engagement with students or institutional policy. **Table 1** illustrates the topics and impact that PSR research related to higher education practice was having, and this research could be characterised as applied research 'directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective' as opposed to basic research which seeks 'observable facts without any particular application or use in view' (OECD, 2002: 30).

Table 1: Research areas and research impacts of professional services research related to higher education

Research Areas	Research Impacts
Equality, diversity, and inclusion	Informing university decisions
Library services	Increase visibility of issues
Public engagement	Promoting best practice informing guidance creation
Museums & archives	Recommendations to change practice
Market research	Recommendations to change policy
Student wellbeing	Creating sector-wide networks
Student experience	Community building;
User research	Consistent user experience;
Learning, teaching & assessment	Supporting understanding of pedagogic literature for those new to a discipline
Management and administration	Helping to deliver user-led approaches
Belonging, community, connection;	Informing student-led learning in pedagogic practice
Digital content	Creating a new evidence base (for institution and sector)
Digital education	informing pilot interventions
Inclusive recruitment	
Impact evaluations	

Despite adopting a broad definition of what we considered research when circulating the questionnaire, one PSR commented ‘I’m still really unsure if the work I’ve outlined does indeed meet your definition of ‘research’!!’. The need for PSRs to self-identify as someone undertaking research activities – in the absence of a widely recognised definition – is one of the reasons we think the questionnaire only had 22 responses, when we know there are more individuals in the University who are using research approaches in their work. Additionally, we expect the low response number was related to relying on cascade-emails within a large and complex organisation.

The Research Culture and Environment for Professional Services Researchers

Once the concept of a professional services researcher (PSR) was understood by key informants, they were all able to articulate how their service could support PSRs at the University, and many had examples of working with and supporting a PSR. However, institutionally, as the concept of a PSR was not understood, structural challenges permeated the PSR experience and their perceptions of the University research culture surfaced in the questionnaire response.

Academic prestige

Many PSR (9) felt that research conducted by professional services staff was not valued, with only 2 respondents agreeing with the statement that 'the University has an inclusive culture where professional services can conduct research'. Less than half the respondents (10) felt confident to share their findings in academic spaces, some reporting that they did not feel their research would be taken seriously. There was a perception that within the University only academic knowledge was valued, and with this, narrow conceptions of what counts as research, that made it harder to professional services staff to do research. As one key informant explained:

In my view, and it is my view, we shouldn't judge everyone by academic standards who are not academics. I think that that just reinforces the wrong culture, reinforces the culture that the only good information, the only good knowledge is academic
(Key Informant Interview)

Another key informant felt that the prestige of academic knowledge had influenced how the University operated: 'you can literally see the disparity of esteem created by our systems and structures, and it's not malicious, it's just unconscious'. Throughout our analysis, we found examples of where the research process had been influenced by this perception, and an assumption that research was only being conducted by academic staff and students, which shaped how research support was positioned, promoted and accessed.

Accessing training and support

Our key informants shared with us a wide-range of training that was available to support different aspects of the research process, including toolkits, exemplars, online training and in-person workshops. This support was open to professional services to engage with, however, PSRs perceived these to be unavailable to them. For example, some descriptions of courses in the University's training system appeared to explicitly exclude professional services by stating that 'this course is for academics and postgraduate research students'. Some PSRs simply didn't know where to look to find training opportunities, which were often communicated through gate-keeper roles based in schools and faculties (e.g., research directors, research managers, school managers), which further compounds assumptions that only academics and postgraduates are active researchers in the institution, and that these researchers are based in schools and faculties.

Our key informants also identified ways they could support a PSR who reached out for advice; whether this was supporting with a funding bid, looking at successful bids, having a tailored discussion about how to manage research data within their project; but PSRs had to actively reach out to these services. And this was not always easy to do as many research services teams did not have an identified contact for professional services staff who are doing research. For some, there was a sense that they ‘had no idea where to start’ when it came to initiating a research project or writing for an academic journal. For those who had navigated these processes, they commented on the difficulty navigating them as a PSR, feeling that the processes had not been designed with them in mind, and so it ‘requires creativity, confidence and a lot of time to navigate’.

Navigating ethical approval

A particularly challenging process for PSRs to navigate was the University’s ethical approval process. Many PSRs were undertaking applied research into higher education practice, using social science methods. This created challenges identifying which ethical panel they should be submitting to, and prompted discussions over whether they were really doing research or in fact undertaking a service evaluation. Navigating the ethical approval process also prompted questions about what counts as publication as many PSRs intended to share their outputs in practitioner spaces, as well as hoping to publish academic articles; this, in turn made it unclear to PSRs which activities required ethical approval and which didn’t. The ethical approval process felt cumbersome for PSRs who were often doing a small-scale study, or a form of action-research. These challenges were also identified through our key informant interviews as difficult for academic staff on teaching-only contracts to navigate because of the nature of their research. On the one hand, there was a view that most PSR research was a form of service evaluation which did not require the full University ethics process, yet if PSRs intended to share their findings with external audiences, for example at conferences, blogs or publications, then ethical approval was often required. The lack of clarity was unsettling, and alienating, especially for those PSRs who felt that research was not considered as part of their role.

[You must] become a specialist in and know a lot about so many different processes, policies, and systems – Worktribe, PURE, CAG, contracts, setting up new partners on My ERP, ethics processes, data management, recruitment, EDI etc. They are all important but when you are scrambling to get a few hours to do the research (besides your main job) then having to learn and complete all these elements is exhausting, overwhelming and off putting. (Key Informant Interview)

Gaps in knowledge and mentoring

Our key informants acknowledged that the existing resources and guidance may not be sufficient for PSRs, partly because the concept of a PSR was not well understood. The key informants recognised a gap in their own knowledge and understanding about what types of research PSRs were doing, and therefore how they could best support them. They also reflected that their training and resources were designed to provide generic tools and advice that a local, discipline-specific mentor (e.g., research supervisors, research directors, principal investigators) could help them interpret and translate to their own research practice.

What we hope that by running those sessions is we've given you sort of our guidance and tools for you guys as applicants to go in and do what you can and then only really come back to us if they can't find the information via their mentor, their head of school, their research group, to sort of network around them within the faculty school that they're in. (Key Informant Interview)

Many PSR did not have a natural mentor, so the absence of a mentor or a clear network of other PSRs represents a significant barrier to effectively translating generic researcher guidance into something relevant for their own, often practice-based, purposes. Connection to gatekeepers and academic experts is a key support mechanism for early career researchers, yet PSRs were often not aware of who acts as gatekeepers or experts, resulting in no pathway to support.

Even if you're an early career academic, ultimately you will have a sponsor somewhere. Whether that is a section head or a head of school, I think that's the challenge for a professional service {who} leads a project in, in those initial stages. Who's the sponsor, who's that natural promoter of that activity. (Key Informant Interview)

Line manager support

Many PSR identified and valued having a supportive line manager for their research, but often their professional services line manager did not have research experience themselves, so could not act as a research mentor.

While line managers were supportive, PSRs felt that they had to work hard to make the case for doing research, articulating how it would benefit the University. There was a perception from PSRs that research was not considered part of their role in the same way as it would be for an academic 'I have never felt like it's something I could really 'do' as part of my role - more peripheral'. This meant that in many cases, PSRs were using their own time to develop research ideas and undertake research, which

led some to feel that ‘my research is viewed as “lesser”, which is very frustrating and discouraging’. Undertaking research in their own time, that was not part of their contract, created a legal grey area in relation to intellectual property and legal support. It also meant that PSRs did not feel their research would help their future promotion prospects because it was not a formal expectation of their role, whereas for an academic, research was a recognized criteria for promotion. This disparity in expectations was felt strongly by a technician doing research who felt that their professional services contract meant ‘I’m often not seen as a researcher’.

Building a research profile

Extending these findings about disparity in experiences, PSR researchers also perceived they had limited opportunities to build their research profile, either internally or externally. For example, only 6 of the respondents to the questionnaire had an online researcher profile on the University’s academic platform – all 6 of these PSRs had held formal academic posts like research assistants, research fellows and lead researchers, which is how they had acquired their online profile. While the process for obtaining an online profile is different for professional services staff, it is possible for a profile to be granted if requested, but most PSRs were not aware of this. Additionally, PSRs perceived a lack of opportunities to share their research practice internally, and a lack of access to funds to attend external conferences.

Enhancing the Research Culture and Environment for Professional Services Researchers

Recommendations for higher education institutions

In this final section we draw out recommendations for HEIs about the steps they could take to enhance the research culture and environment for professional services researchers, informed by specific suggestions made by our key informants, by PSRs who responded to the questionnaire, and our analysis of the data. We recognise PSRs engaging in formal research projects may be a relatively niche occupational group, yet, a larger group will be using research approaches to inform their practice and may need to engage with core research services such as ethical approval, or bidding for external funds. Because of this, we believe there are simple steps that HEIs could take to acknowledge that professional staff may be engaging in research and to make support structures more inclusive. Below, we have set out recommendations for HEI leadership, operations, and individual PSRs.

Our findings surfaced cultural assumptions about who is doing research, who can do research and what type of research is perceived to be worthwhile, which converged to create an environment where PSRs felt their research was not acknowledged. This is a leadership challenge to address, which will take time, but which could begin with:

- Acknowledging that applied research may have different support needs, ethical considerations, funding opportunities, and outputs to basic research, and encouraging research support services to adopt a broader definition of research
- Acknowledging that professional services staff may be active researchers and/or using research approaches to inform their practice and should receive appropriate support to conduct and share their research
- Recognising the benefit of evidence-informed practice within professional services roles
- Identifying active PSRs within an HEI who could act as champions, showcasing and encouraging PSR research to increase visibility
- Including PSRs in research forums and governance structures to represent the PSR experience

At a more operational level, there are steps HEIs could take relating to resources, incentives, structures and processes, in the short and medium-term, that can create a more inclusive research culture for PSRs. For example:

- Using more inclusive language such as ‘researchers’ rather than ‘academics and students’ or being explicit that professional services researchers are included
- Ensuring systems and processes recognise that researchers may be based within professional service divisions, rather than solely in academic units
- Identifying a named contact within each research service area to respond to queries from PSRs, whether they are based in an academic unit or a professional service division
- Identifying where PSRs may need more tailored guidance or training
- Opening up, or make more explicit, that internal funding opportunities (for research, conferences, research development etc.,) can be accessed by PSRs

- Ensuring PSRs know that they are an intended audience for, and can access research training, guidance and research online profiles and support them to develop their profiles

To support PSRs doing their research, relationships are key, and HEIs could enable relationship-building, for example by:

- Creating spaces for PSRs to come together, to share their experiences and access peer support
- Creating mechanisms, either formal or informal, for PSRs to identify a suitable mentor to help them navigate the research process

Finally, whilst there are things HEI's could do to enhance the research culture for PSRs, we recognise that PSRs are active agents in their own career development and research endeavours, and encourage individual PSRs to:

- Recognise when they are in fact doing research
- Look for opportunities to share their work both internally and externally.
- Find peers to share experiences and ideas
- Support the development of professional services researcher networks within their own organisation and beyond
- Ask for support and guidance from your organisation

Future opportunities

Our findings are based on the experiences of PSRs and the research support services provided in a single research-intensive University. We expect that these findings will, to some degree, echo experiences in other UK research-intensive universities, but perhaps not in a teaching-focused University; further research is needed to explore the PSR experience across the UK sector. Our conceptual framework can help shape future research, and our findings provide an initial evidence base from which to compare and contrast experiences in other settings and over time.

Our focus in this article has been on understanding the experiences of PSRs and the support available, so that we could make practical recommendations for action in the short and medium term that will benefit PSRs. We have surfaced deep-seated cultural assumptions about what research is valued and who conducts research, that have shaped the research process and make it more challenging for PSRs. These challenges are likely to impact other researchers within the institution who are engaged with applied research, for example teaching-focused academics

and pedagogic researchers; therefore taking action to make the research culture more inclusive for PSRs is likely to benefit a wider group of staff. It may also prove a useful step in reconceptualising an HEI's approach to people, culture and environment as they prepare for REF2029.

Our findings have also surfaced how the research that many PSRs are undertaking is designed with impact at the forefront. We suggest that there could be learning from the research that PSRs undertake for wider institutional benefit. As the sector continues to come under more scrutiny over its finances and effectiveness, there is potential within the professional services workforce for research to play a bigger role. Adopting our conceptual framework for professional services researchers, these opportunities lie in enabling and encouraging research-informed approaches to professional services work, and in supporting professional services to lead research initiatives, within their institution or across the sector. There are actions individual institutions could take to harness this potential, and for professional organisations, expanding on the initiatives already underway by TASO, AdvanceHE; and the Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) who has recently taken steps in this direction by establishing a research special interest group and promoting research-enhanced practice in its next conference.

The University's current culture shapes a narrow definition of what counts as research within a University environment, we believe this needs to be broadened. This will present several challenges for an institution, including challenging structural expectations about what an academic contract and a professional services contract entail. There may be a limit to how much a research culture can expand to include professional services researchers without revisiting the meaning and purpose of a professional services role and their contractual obligations.

Conclusion

Through this article, we have surfaced insights that add to the current literature and debates around research culture UK in higher education and the role of professional services in higher education.

We have introduced a new working definition and conceptual framework to articulate the activities that professional services researchers may engage with. We have begun to use this framework to understand PSRs at the University of Bristol, surfacing new insights into the research areas that PSRs explore and the impact that PSR research can have. Whilst drawn from a small data-set, this insight extends the research literature about professional services contributions to research, which have primarily focused on their role supporting and enabling the research of others, and enforces more recent literature that argues that professional staff within

higher education have knowledge and expertise that can help HEIs deliver their strategic objectives.

By drawing on the expertise of our key informants, and our experiences of PSRs at Bristol, we have shown how structural and cultural forces have shaped the research process within this research-intensive HEI, which are built around assumptions that it is only academics and students who are doing research, and that a particular approach to research might be expected. This has resulted in PSRs feeling that the research culture at the University does not recognise or value the research contributions they are making. We have used these findings to propose practical steps that HEIs could take to create a more inclusive research culture for PSRs and signalled potential future opportunities to explore the role of PSRs in higher education in ways that could have positive benefits for HEIs and the sector.

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Dr Charlotte Verney has worked in UK higher education professional services since 2006, holding positions at multiple universities. Her professional area of work is student administration, policy and systems. Charlotte has been active in research since 2009, completing a masters in international higher education and a professional doctorate in education. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and is Joint Editor of *Perspectives: policy and practice in higher education*. She has received several small-grants to carry out research projects related to professional services in higher education, and is an advocate for supporting newer researchers in the higher education space.



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Endnotes

ⁱ See: Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education. 2025. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/tpsp20> [Accessed: 25 January 2025].