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The invisible majority: Professional and support staff and the future of UK higher education

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About the authors

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Together, Anna Verhamme and John Britton authored a published study of higher education delivery models for the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the predecessor body to Medr, Wales's newly established tertiary education regulator.

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Foreword

We asked professional and support staff across UK higher education what their working lives are like. Many answered our surveys at far greater length than the questions required, and much of what follows comes from their responses.

What they describe is a workforce holding a great deal together with very little designed around it. Jobs have grown without being redesigned, career paths are often unclear or absent, and change arrives already decided. Three-quarters report sustained high work intensity. Sixty per cent still described their day-to-day work as good or very good, and it would be easy to take that as reassurance. It is not. A workforce that has kept going under sustained pressure is not evidence that the pressure is sustainable.

The senior professional services leaders we interviewed described the same conditions. When the people running services and the people working in them give the same account, the problem is not how any one institution is managed. It is that designing this work has never been anyone's job.

Our consultants have worked in professional services roles, and they kept meeting the same problems in different institutions with nothing that could clearly demonstrate what had worked and what had not. That is why AHEP Consulting commissioned this research. The sector has no shortage of assertion about what restructuring, centralisation and outsourcing achieve, and almost no measurement of whether they did. Building that evidence is one of the recommendations this report makes to government and sector bodies. Institutions are making decisions of real consequence without knowing what happened when others made the same ones.

The question institutions are asking is a narrow one. Reducing the cost of professional services is reasonable in the present climate, but it is a different question from what the strategy actually depends on, and how to build that within the money available. The first produces a smaller workforce, the second one that is able to do what is asked of it.

What an institution can do also determines what the sector can do. Whatever the sector chooses next, whether shared services, joint procurement or partnerships beyond higher education, runs through professional services or it does not run at all.

None of this is an argument that professional services matter more than teaching and research. Academic colleagues are living through the same cuts, made on the same reasoning, and the two workforces succeed or fail together.

The decisions now being taken on this workforce will settle what it can do for the decade after. For vice-chancellors, chief operating officers and professional services leaders, the choice is between working out where the next reduction falls and designing the workforce the strategy actually requires. What follows sets out what the people doing that work already know. The difficulty is not that this understanding is missing, but that it often sits furthest from where decisions are made.

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Executive summary

In 2023, HEPI published a comparative study of higher education academic staff terms and conditions. In his Foreword, Nick Hillman acknowledged the report had left out a significant part of the workforce:

> *if any other organisation now wishes to pick up the baton to compare the conditions for professional services staff to those for others working in higher education and elsewhere … we would be keen to speak with them.*

The Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) wanted to do just that.

This report picks up that baton – but goes further than a comparison of terms and conditions. It examines how the professional services workforce is changing, how staff experience their work and whether institutions are preparing this workforce for what comes next. It also asks a question the 2023 study could not: what happens when an institution systematically underinvests in the workforce it depends on to function?

UK higher education providers face a fundamental contradiction. They depend on professional and support staff more than ever but are reducing this workforce as financial pressures increase.

This report draws on two surveys completed by 450 respondents, more than 400 of them professional and support staff, describing their own experiences, together with analysis of 50 institutional annual reports, interviews with senior leaders and recent research.[1]

The findings are stark. Despite sustained pressure, 60% of survey respondents described their day-to-day work as good or very good. They value making a difference to students and colleagues. But this commitment masks systematic underinvestment.

Two-thirds of respondents say change and uncertainty over the past five years has affected them negatively. The burden falls hardest on those in the lowest pay band: 79% of staff earning below £40,000 report negative impacts, compared with 51% of those earning £60,000 or more. Because lower-paid roles are disproportionately held by women and ethnic minority staff, these impacts land on groups already facing persistent pay gaps. The costs of institutional decisions are not shared equally.

Three-quarters of the survey respondents report sustained high work intensity. Work has become fragmented, reactive and deadline-driven. Jobs have expanded without redesign. Career frameworks are absent or ineffective. Too often, change is done to staff rather than with them. Management quality varies sharply.

Most institutions respond to financial pressure through restructuring, hiring freezes and outsourcing. These achieve short-term savings but dismantle the capabilities needed for the future.

The report sets out what needs to change – and who needs to act.

Why this matters now

Professional and support staff make up 56% of the university workforce and 48% of the pay bill. They run student services, maintain buildings, manage research grants, handle compliance and operate the digital systems. Yet financial pressure has brought repeated restructuring, redundancy and cuts to the very capacity institutions need to recover.

This is not a workforce problem that can wait. Automation will reshape administrative roles over the next decade. New digital systems require specialist skills. Universities that arrive at that future with a depleted, demoralised professional services workforce will struggle to function.

The choice is not between spending money and saving it. It is between investing now or paying much more later.

Introduction

This report is about the staff whose work sustains higher education providers day-to-day. They manage finances, maintain buildings, support students, administer research grants, ensure legal compliance, run IT systems and handle recruitment. Some hold professional qualifications and could command high salaries in other sectors. Others provide the essential operational support without which no institution could function.

There is no single settled name for this group. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) uses 'non-academic' – a label that is telling. Over time, the collective term has shifted: from 'support staff', through to 'professional support staff', to 'professional services staff'. Each change sought to reflect the breadth and expertise of the work better. Yet 'professional services' is often read narrowly, in ways that leave out lower-paid roles that are no less essential to how a provider runs, including cleaning, maintenance and reception staff. Throughout this report, we use 'professional and support staff' or 'professional services staff' for ease of reading, but we mean the full range – from senior directors to the people who ensure a lecture theatre, lab or performance space is open, clean and equipped on a Monday morning.

The work is changing fast. Student needs evolve. Regulatory requirements multiply. Digital systems grow more complex. The roles that kept higher education providers running five years ago look markedly different today. Meanwhile, the operating environment creates constant uncertainty. Small belated increases in tuition fees are outweighed by cumulative pressures on university finances, including inflation, energy costs, higher employer National Insurance and pension contributions, reduced international student income and forthcoming policy-driven levies on international student income. Most institutions run cost reduction programmes. Some reduce course offerings, others sell assets. Staffing cuts across all parts of the workforce have become a common response to financial pressure.

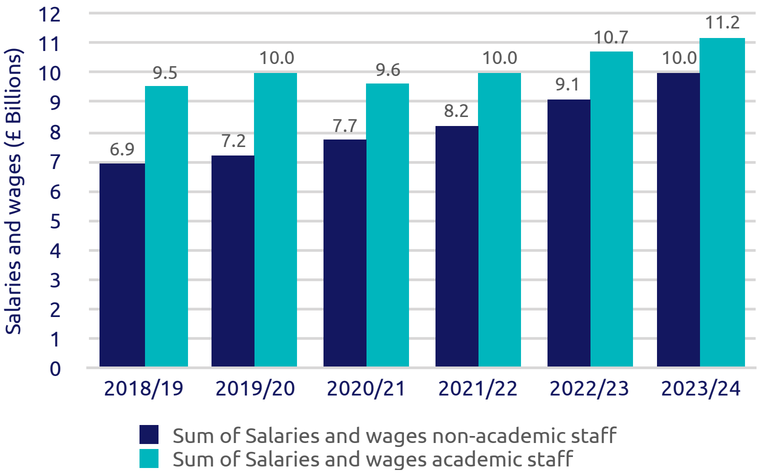
None of this is an argument for standing still. The pressures described here are real, and the sector has to change at a pace many will find uncomfortable. The question is not whether change happens but whether it is designed and delivered in a way that builds capability or strips it out. That distinction runs through everything that follows.

The report draws on survey evidence from 450 respondents, analysis of 50 institutional annual reports, interviews with senior leaders, examples of effective practice from higher education and local government and recent academic research. The picture that emerges is one of profound change handled in starkly different ways across the sector. Some institutions have developed approaches to job design, career development and change management that genuinely work, and this report draws on those examples. The sector is not uniform and covering so much ground in a single report means that some generalisations will not apply everywhere. But the weight of evidence points to the same underlying problems consistently enough to warrant sector-wide attention.

Chapter 1: The workforce is changing

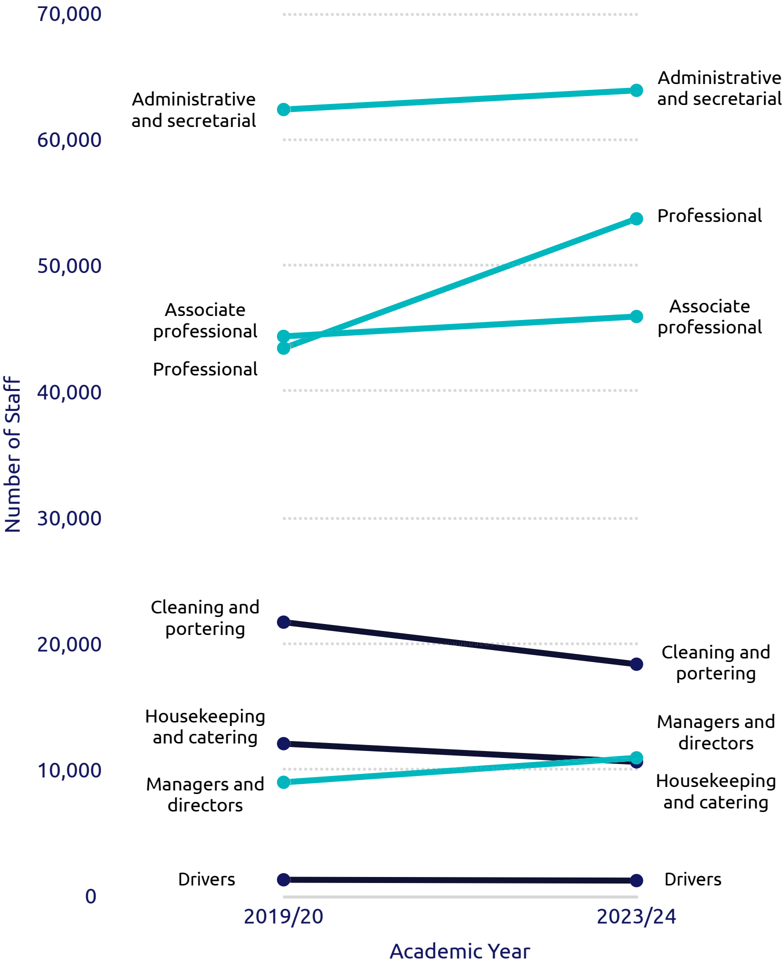
More than a quarter of a million people work in professional and support roles across UK higher education providers. In 2023, these 255,678 full-time equivalent staff made up 56% of the workforce and 48% of the total pay bill, up from just 42% six years earlier. Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, spending on professional and support staff salaries grew faster than spending on academic salaries.[2] This signals a fundamental rebalancing of the professional and support workforce towards professional expertise.

Figure 1: Salaries and wages for academic and 'non-academic' staff over the last six years (HESA data)



The composition is shifting in complex ways. Professional occupations – higher-paid roles requiring specialist skills – have grown fastest. Associate professional, administrative and secretarial positions, and managers have also increased. The roles experiencing decline are catering, portering, security, cleaning and housekeeping staff – the operational functions many institutions have outsourced.[3]

Figure 2: Professional and support staff numbers, 2019/20 to 2023/24 (headcount by Standard Occupational Classification, HESA Staff data (teal=growing, navy=declining))



Headcount by Standard Occupational Classification	*2019/20*	*2023/24*
Administrative and secretarial	62,375	63,895
Associate professional	44,385	45,960
Professional	43,450	53,710
Cleaning and portering	21,720	18,385
Housekeeping and catering	12,085	10,640
Managers and directors	9,020	10,960
Drivers	1,290	1,225

There are three parallel trends.

First, providers are investing in new specialist roles to support digital infrastructure, meet compliance requirements and manage outsourced services. These require professional qualifications and technical expertise. Secondly, institutions are outsourcing lower-paid operational roles while expanding professional capacity to manage complexity. Thirdly, one-third of professional and support staff still work in administrative and secretarial occupations – the administrative backbone. These are the roles facing greatest uncertainty as institutions automate processes. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) claim that, although administrative occupations will decline by 150,000 jobs overall nationally by 2035 due to automation, replacement demand from retirement alone will create 1.9 million vacancies in these occupations over the same period.[4] Providers still need to recruit administrative staff – but they need staff equipped for a fundamentally different operating environment.

Chapter 2: Why these changes are happening

Three forces are reshaping professional services work: digital complexity; regulatory intensification; and restructuring.

Institutions invest heavily in digital systems, but business cases focused on student experience are easier to get approved. The return on investment for digitising back-office functions is harder to evidence, so those cases often stall.

One respondent working at a large university noted:

> *My current employer still uses [Microsoft] Word documents for all human resources recruitment and hiring processes. This slows everything down and creates unneeded additional admin which takes away from [my] ability to do core day-to-day work such as effectively leading my team.*

A manager who should be leading a team is instead chasing paperwork. The alternative is a human resources system with structured workflows and controlled access, so that personal data sits in one place rather than in numerous documents and email attachments, where it is harder to secure and easier to duplicate or lose.

When digital investment cases proceed, they typically include two promises: replacing inefficient ways of working and reducing costs.

However, promised cost savings from technology rarely arrive, as institutions invest in purchasing systems but not in the training and process redesign needed to make them work – a challenge explored in detail later in this report.

Institutions then carry both costs at once. They pay more for the specialist staff needed to run complex digital infrastructure, while administrative roles that were expected to shrink remain essential because systems were bought without the process redesign and training that would have allowed them to deliver. That is a consequence of how digital investment is specified and resourced. Professional services colleagues are the people who procure, configure and run these systems, and where they are given the time and the authority to do that work properly the results are markedly better.

Compliance and regulatory burdens have also intensified. Employers face escalating requirements around data protection, student support, health and safety and equality legislation. Meeting these demands requires qualified professionals.

A third force acts directly on the professional services workforce: restructuring to reduce costs. Institutions are navigating a funding model that has not kept pace with falling international student numbers and rising costs, and regulated fee income means providers cannot price their way out, so cost reduction falls on staffing. Professional and support staff account for 48% of the pay bill, which makes them an obvious place to look when institutions need savings at speed. The question this report asks is not whether to manage costs, but how to do so in ways that preserve long-term capability rather than trading it away for short-term savings.

Yet restructuring is expensive. Institutions routinely hire consultancies to lead the work and bring in additional specialists such as change managers. The redesigned structures often introduce additional management layers as part of service centralisation – adding cost rather than removing it. Meanwhile, productivity drops as staff focus on what change means for their own jobs rather than on the work itself.

The deeper problem is a cycle of underinvestment. Institutions cut training budgets as an easy saving, then discover they lack the capabilities they need to deliver more effective services. Because they have not developed skills internally, they buy them externally at higher cost. Survey respondents recognise this clearly: 'Training and development budgets are easy targets for cost saving, but by not developing staff you're not enabling more effective delivery of services'.

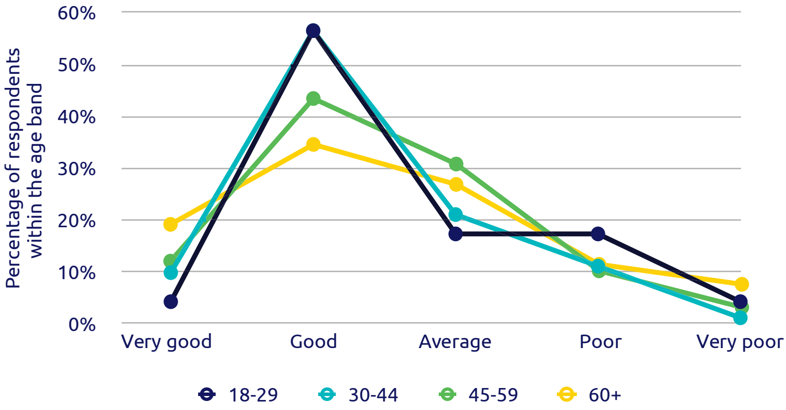
These three forces – digital complexity, regulatory intensification and restructuring – create an impossible triangle. Each demands greater professional capability. Together, they make investing in that capability harder.

Chapter 3: How staff experience these pressures

Despite the challenges described in this report, a majority of respondents to our experience survey (60%) described their day-to-day work as 'good' or 'very good'. Perceptions of day-to-day work experience vary by age, with respondents aged 60+ more likely than other age groups to report very positive experiences, but also more likely to report very poor experiences.

We analysed responses by pay band, working hours, contract type, size of provider and sex, and found responses to be remarkably consistent across these categories. One exception was UK nations, with Scottish professional services staff more likely to have a poor daily experience. The Scottish funding position offers a plausible explanation. Universities Scotland calculated that the Scottish Funding Council allocations for 2025/26 left 17 of the 19 higher education institutions in Scotland with a real-terms reduction in teaching funding. While our data cannot establish the connection, the pattern is consistent.[5]

Figure 3: How would you describe the quality of your day-to-day work experience? (by age band)

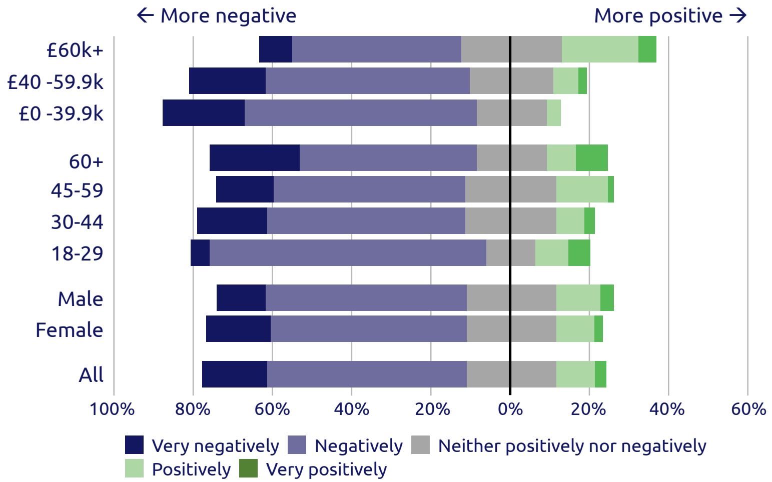


The most frequently cited sources of meaning were: making a positive difference to students and colleagues; feeling recognised and respected; having autonomy over work; and alignment with institutional values. This is a workforce that cares about its work.

But this commitment masks a more troubling picture. Just under two-thirds (65%) of respondents said change and uncertainty had affected them negatively over the past five years. In Scotland, the figure reached 81%. Work has become more fragmented, reactive and deadline-driven, undermining job satisfaction and the sense that work is manageable or meaningful.[6]

The impact does not fall equally. Of staff earning £39,999 or below, 79% reported negative effects from change and uncertainty, compared with 51% of those earning £60,000 or more. Younger staff, those on fixed-term contracts and a significantly large group of staff aged over 60 were also more likely to report harm. This inequality runs through every dimension of the findings that follow – from workload and job design to career prospects and financial security. The staff who bear the greatest burden of institutional decisions have the least influence over them.

Figure 4: How have change and uncertainty impacted you over the past five years? (by salary, age, sex)



The consequences are serious. Sustained high work intensity is a defining feature of professional services work, driving elevated levels of burnout, depression and anxiety.[7] Staff repeatedly describe chronic stress, emotional depletion and declining mental health linked to change, through excessive workloads and prolonged pressure.[8] Formal health-related benefits – enhanced sick pay, flexible working, wellbeing support – are comparatively strong.[9] But these protections cannot compensate for working conditions that generate the problems in the first place. Institutional change processes often fail to consider staff health explicitly, leading to stress, overload and burnout during periods of transformation.[10]

Academic staff experience similarly high levels of sustained work intensity, with widespread reports of stress, mental health strain and a sense of work being never-ending. However, this is framed less as a consequence of organisational change programmes and more as a product of the intrinsic nature and expanding expectations of academic roles, alongside significant inequalities driven by job insecurity and precarious contracts, particularly for early-career staff.[11]

The evidence suggests that improving staff wellbeing requires rebuilding the quality of work itself, not simply enhancing benefits or support.

As Richard Harrison, who has worked in professional services across six UK universities, observes:

> *In recent years the sector has endured and continues to experience, a hard rain of structural change … what the sector is, of course, is its people; it is they who experience the consequences of these sudden, fundamental changes.*[12]

The following sections examine the three areas where this 'hard rain' falls and what institutions can do in response.

Chapter 4: Work that does not work

Three connected failures in how work is designed leave professional services staff caught between rising demands and shrinking support.

1. **Jobs that have outgrown their design.** Roles have expanded without corresponding redesign of expectations, accountability or grading. Staff operate in what researchers describe as 'third space' roles sitting between administration, academia and management. HEPI has examined these roles in research contexts, and the same pattern appears in regulatory and compliance contexts.[13] While these roles can be intellectually demanding, they are characterised by unclear boundaries, competing demands and responsibility for outcomes the postholders have no power to control. One respondent captured a common experience:

> *My role has expanded without any change in salary grade. I have been given an additional team to manage with little knowledge of their work and almost no support as my line manager is also over-stretched.*

2. **Workload that has become unmanageable.** Three-quarters of respondents report sustained high work intensity. The pattern is consistent: long hours; frequent deadline clashes; the expectation to be constantly available; and little time for rest or recovery. Repeated restructurings, vacancies left unfilled and expanding responsibilities compound the problem. This is not a temporary spike but a structural condition.

3. **Digital systems that frustrate rather than enable.** Survey respondents describe core systems that are difficult to use, poorly integrated and unreliable. The most prominent complaints are system complexity and fragmentation, increased administrative burden, frequent outages, insufficient training and limited responsiveness to user feedback. Tasks require manual workarounds

or repeated data entry. Staff feel expected to learn complex systems independently. Professional services teams implement and run these systems, and the frustration respondents describe is less with the technology itself than with being asked to deliver on decisions they had no part in shaping, without the time or training to do it well.

A small number of respondents describe clear benefits from newer, well-designed systems – integrated document management, collaboration platforms and reliable remote-access tools. These good examples tend to occur where systems are joined up, user-friendly and aligned with how staff actually work. They demonstrate what is possible when digital design starts from the work rather than from the technology.

These three failures reinforce each other, and the staff who bear the greatest weight of them, those in lower-paid and heavily operational roles, are least likely to have the autonomy, flexibility or voice to push back.

Chapter 5: Change and management

How institutions manage change determines whether pressure becomes damaging or productive. The evidence from this research suggests most get this badly wrong.

Too often, staff feel change is done to them rather than with them

Institutional change typically prioritises systems, processes and outcomes over staff experience. When change increases workload, fragments roles or removes discretion, it directly undermines wellbeing. Professional services staff frequently bear the operational burden of implementation, absorbing additional work without corresponding adjustment to capacity.[14]

Fair consultation has a legal meaning: sharing proposals while staff can still realistically influence the outcome, giving enough information and time to respond, and genuinely considering what comes back. Where 20 or more redundancies are proposed at one establishment, employers must also consult with a view to reaching agreement. The accounts we received suggest a widespread gap between the protective intent of the law and the reality experienced:

> *I was on secondment and then found out once the business case had been published that my substantive post had been removed from the structure, so was effectively without a role after 19 years of service and an exemplary record.*

Staff describe change as rushed and reactive, with financial pressure used to compress the planning and consultation that good practice requires. The result is change that erodes the trust institutions need to manage further disruption.

Values are promoted but not practised

We tested how institutional values are reflected in how professional services staff are led, recognised and involved. Respondents were slightly more positive (41%) than negative (37%), with alignment stronger at smaller institutions. Where good practice exists, recognition is embedded in everyday management – constructive feedback, realistic performance reviews and opportunities for development. Several respondents noted the importance of equitable access to training, secondments and promotion, which reinforces the message that professional services staff are valued as long-term institutional assets.

Many respondents described values such as respect, inclusion and collaboration as being set out in the strategy documents but not reflected in how decisions are made: who is consulted, what continues to be funded and which roles are protected when savings are required.[15]

> *I am autistic (formal diagnosis) so that change and uncertainty can be particularly difficult for me, prompting anxiety and depression ... on some occasions the impact has been severe.*

When professional services work is treated as 'just administration', power imbalances undermine dignity and respect. These dynamics point to a deeper cultural challenge. In many institutions, the divide between academic and professional staff shapes assumptions about whose expertise counts, whose time is valued and whose contribution matters. This division is not universal – relationships range from exclusionary to genuinely collegiate – but where it exists, it corrodes trust.

The gender pay gap compounds these concerns. Rose Stephenson of HEPI observed that reports submitted to the Government's pay gap portal do not separate academic from professional services staff. Understanding the gender gap by these cohorts at both institutional and sector level would be valuable.[16] Where subsidiary companies exist, separating lower-paid and higher-paid workers across different entities is misleading, making both pay gaps appear smaller than a combined figure.

Management quality is uneven and matters most where it is worst

Line management quality is repeatedly identified, in our survey responses and in the wider literature, as a critical determinant of good work. Poor managers leave staff exposed.

Lower-paid staff are more likely to suffer from poor management. Higher-paid staff are more likely to have the professional status, networks and discretion that buffer them from poor institutional practice. Where management is poor, the cause usually sits above the individual manager, in training that is absent or poorly matched to the job and in workloads that leave no time to manage. Across the UK as a whole, only six-in-10 managers say they have the training and information (60%) or the time (59%) they need to manage people well.[17]

More respondents reported that relationships, team culture and communication had worsened over the past five years than reported improvement (43% compared with 31%). Younger workers and the highest salaried were more likely to have experienced positive change. The data suggest male workers reported slightly more favourable experiences than female workers, though the difference was not statistically significant.

Chapter 6: Careers, reward and voice

Higher education providers have developed academic career and reward structures over many decades.[18] Equivalent structures for professional and support staff are far less developed. Professional body frameworks exist for some professional services functions, but these operate at sector level, and less attention has been paid to how they translate into institutions. 'PS career development always feels quite limited when stood alongside academic processes' was how one respondent described it.

Unclear pathways, shrinking development

The careers of professional and support staff are fundamentally different from those of academic staff. An academic career typically follows a single discipline along a well-understood path. Promotion decisions rest on individual, measurable outputs validated externally, and promotion is tied to increased outputs.

Professional and support staff careers work differently. Staff build careers by deepening functional expertise, developing specialist skills and moving between functions or between institutions. The value they deliver is collaborative and shaped by institutional context, and often subjectively assessed. Promotion depends on a vacancy existing.

Where career frameworks exist, they rarely describe what competence means across a non-linear career. Often growth and development are tied to formal grade changes within a function. Respondents report development routes being unclear, narrow or blocked, particularly in flatter structures following restructurings.

Good practice points in a different direction. Researchers recommend structured, inclusive pathways that recognise multiple forms of success – lateral moves, project leadership, cross-functional expertise and multiple forms of valuable human capital – informal leadership, systems knowledge and institutional memory.[19]

As the pace of technology increases, providers need to upskill their workforce, but in practice many staff describe training budgets being cut, opportunities becoming more limited and support for external courses declining.

Workload pressure is an additional barrier, particularly for lower-paid staff and those in heavily operational roles who are often required to absorb additional duties and are therefore unable to step away to learn new skills. Capable staff feel overlooked and constrained by rigid systems or assumptions.

Pay, reward and the gap between promise and practice

Some staff employed directly or indirectly by providers are paid below the Real Living Wage. The bottom two spine points on the national framework agreement sit beneath it and some institutions have outsourced services to companies that employ staff on lower terms.[20]

The pay picture extends well beyond the lowest-paid roles. Four-in-10 professional and support staff earn less than £30,000 a year.[21] Pay has stagnated, with the University and College Union (UCU) estimating a 30% real-terms fall since 2009.[22] Many staff describe persistent worry about meeting living costs, managing inflation and coping with unexpected expenses. For lower- and middle-paid staff, responses frequently convey a sense of precarity and diminished morale. Several link financial strain directly to poor mental health and reduced motivation.

The sector's record is not uniformly poor. Many UK universities have become accredited Living Wage employers – a higher proportion than either local authorities or National Health Service trusts – committing to pay the Real Living Wage to both their direct and contracted workforce. Research found that accreditation led to pay increases for over 25,000 employees, the majority in support roles, with a quarter of beneficiaries working for contractors rather than the university directly.[23]

Higher education offers comparatively strong pay-related benefits, including pensions, sick pay and leave entitlements.[24] Employer pension contributions in many cases equate to around 20% of salary.[25] Sick pay provides a median of 8.5 weeks full pay and 8.5 weeks half pay after one year's service, compared with typically four weeks in other sectors. Entitlements do vary between staff groups: the equivalent for academic staff is 13 weeks and 13 weeks, reflecting separate bargaining histories that are unlikely to be reconciled quickly. These benefits are also under active pressure, as discussed in Chapter 7.

Staff voice exists in theory but not always in practice

Employers report using a range of mechanisms, including meetings, surveys and forums, to gather staff views. But whether these mechanisms lead to genuine dialogue that influences decisions matters directly for staff wellbeing. Trust and mutual respect emerge as central to positive working relationships, with staff valuing environments where professional judgement is recognised and differences of view can be expressed without fear. Where these conditions are absent, frustration and disengagement follow.

Chapter 7: How institutions are responding

The challenges described in this report are well known within the higher education sector. The question is how institutions respond. The evidence points to four broad approaches and their consequences.

1. Crisis management: the default mode

Many institutions respond to current financial challenges through restructuring, voluntary redundancy schemes and hiring freezes. These achieve short-term cost reductions but often destroy capabilities needed for the future. The scale is documented. The Queen Mary branch of the University and College Union maintains a live tracker of redundancies, restructures and closures, which recorded 110 institutions undergoing redundancy or restructuring programmes as of July 2026, and more than 12,000 announced job cuts across the sector in the 12 months to that point.[26] Closures of provision follow the same pattern: in a Universities UK survey of 60 institutions carried out in spring 2025, 18% reported closing entire departments, up from 9% a year earlier.[27]

This approach treats professional services staff as costs to be minimised rather than assets to be developed. The immediate problem – the deficit – gets addressed. The underlying problem of absent workforce development infrastructure gets worse.

2. Outsourcing and subsidiaries: managing costs without losing sight of values

Facing sustained financial pressure, many institutions have looked to their workforce for cost savings. Two approaches have emerged. The first is outsourcing operational services – catering, cleaning, security, portering – to specialist contractors, a trend reflected in the significant fall in directly-employed staff. The second approach is newer. Analysis of institutional annual reports shows several providers creating subsidiary companies that employ newly-appointed professional services staff on different terms and conditions, particularly around pensions. Both approaches are a rational response to real financial constraints.

But both have consequences that extend beyond the campus. In many towns and cities the higher education provider is among the largest employers, so the terms it offers form a significant share of local employment quality in their own right. Reducing those terms for new entrants lowers that share directly, whether or not any other employer follows. When outsourcing leads to reduced terms and conditions, that effect ripples outward. Outsourcing and subsidiary structures can create two tiers of employment within the same campus: one group with the terms and protections of the national framework agreement and another without.[28] Staff who transfer to a contractor retain some protections, but colleagues recruited afterwards do not, and over time the gap between the two groups widens.[29]

The employment relationship itself also changes.[30] Writing about outsourced public sector workers more than 20 years ago, the journalist Polly Toynbee observed that there is no loyalty to outsourced staff, nor is any expected of them.[31] The goodwill, discretionary effort and institutional knowledge that universities depend on are the product of people feeling that they belong somewhere. Outsourcing puts that at risk in ways that do not appear on any balance sheet. As discussed earlier, these arrangements also affect published gender pay gap figures – subsidiary structures make inequality less visible.

The operational case for outsourcing or management of services through subsidiary companies is also more conditional than it first appears. Contracted and subsidiary arrangements work best where a service can be clearly defined – where scope, standards and performance measures can be written into a contract and monitored.[32] Catering and cleaning are relatively straightforward in this respect because the outputs are observable. Where outputs are harder to observe and verify – in student support, IT or research administration – contracts are inevitably incomplete and the risk of quality shortfalls rises.[33]

The National Audit Office (NAO) has consistently found that public sector organisations often lack the commercial and contract management skills needed to get sustained value from complex outsourcing arrangements.[34] Higher education providers are no different.

Several senior managers described to us how institutions underestimate what active contract management requires, and how problems that emerge mid-contract can cost more to resolve than the original savings were worth. The capability to specify and procure services, manage contracts and hold providers to account is itself a skill and one that institutions have not always invested in.

The same capability gap that makes outsourcing attractive – institutions struggling to run services efficiently themselves – is precisely what makes outsourcing arrangements hard to manage well.

3. Collaboration: the option hiding in plain sight

A third approach is discussed constantly and delivered rarely. Shared services, pooling common functions such as payroll, finance processing, information technology support or estates management appear on agendas across the sector, but few arrangements reach the point of operating at scale. Career pathways would extend across providers, enabling specialist expertise no single institution could sustain alone.

The model exists elsewhere. Local authorities share legal services, internal audit and back-office functions. NHS trusts collaborate on procurement, pathology and payroll. These arrangements demonstrate efficiency gains without privatisation.

Some sector-wide collaboration already exists. Examples are the Technician Commitment and the Association of Heads of University Administration's (AHUA) service efficiency benchmarking tools.

The Technician Commitment: what sector-wide action looks like

In 2017, universities, research institutes and sector bodies recognised that technicians were poorly visible, under-recognised and without clear career paths. Their response was collective. The Technician Commitment, now stewarded by the UK Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy, asks signatory organisations to take specific action against four challenges.

More than 140 universities and research organisations have signed up. The Commitment gives each organisation space to act on its own circumstances while providing a common framework, a community of practice and accountability through action plans.

An independent evaluation found that the Commitment triggered cultural change and leveraged several million pounds in external funding for the technical community.[35] The Commitment required sector bodies to agree that a group of staff mattered, to name the problems clearly and to ask institutions to act.

Perhaps the sector's most underused asset is its collective weight as a buyer. Software companies sell the same student records, finance, human resources and timetabling systems to more than a hundred universities, negotiating with each one separately. Institutions compound the problem by routinely demanding bespoke installations. Acting together, providers could require vendors to deliver better standard solutions rather than paying a premium to reinvent what others have already built.

VAT rules also work against shared services. Providers must charge each other VAT on services that would be VAT-free if delivered in-house, an artificial cost penalty that makes collaboration more expensive than it should be. But VAT alone does not explain why shared services receive so little attention compared with institutional mergers, which are vastly more disruptive, expensive and risky than sharing back-office functions.[36]

The sector also lacks a structured way to learn from what works. Providers pursue similar changes – restructuring, outsourcing, digital investment, new career frameworks – but each institution largely starts from scratch, with little systematic evaluation of outcomes. Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) has demonstrated the value of sharing what works in student access and participation.

4. The alternative: strategic investment

The case studies in this report show that a different approach is possible. Providers that invest in their professional services workforce, through structured development, digital literacy programmes, fair reward systems and cohort recruitment, where groups of staff are recruited and trained together against a common framework and rotate across functions rather than being appointed one vacancy at a time, build capability rather than dismantling it. The three forces reshaping this work will not diminish, and are more likely to intensify. The choice is whether to prepare the workforce for that or to arrive at it with depleted skills, fractured trust and the costs of rebuilding what was lost.

Chapter 8: What needs to change

The evidence in this report points in two directions. Much of what needs to change lies within the gift of individual higher education providers. But some of the most significant barriers sit beyond any single institution's reach and require sector-level solutions. None of it can wait. The pressures on providers are immediate, and the changes set out below need to happen alongside the cost reduction most institutions are already undertaking rather than after it.

Five principles emerge from the evidence. Each describes an area where focused attention and investment by individual providers would make the greatest difference.

1. Design jobs that work

Good job design starts with clarity. Staff need to understand what their role is for, how it connects to wider institutional goals and how their contribution creates value.

Job evaluation tools like the Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA) framework, used by 70% of UK universities, aim to address this. But the system has a structural flaw. Designed to ensure equal pay for equal value, it struggles to recognise specialist expertise that does not fit traditional hierarchies. As one respondent explained:

> *Specialist roles that have no management or research are assumed to be low grade – lawyer, software engineer, structural engineer – but these roles are highly skilled and can command high salaries elsewhere. We need to attract excellent professional services staff but in reality we have to bring in inexperienced people and develop them, often to lose them to other sectors when fully trained.*

HERA's 14 elements were designed in 1995. The Educational Competencies Consortium, which administers the scheme, states that periodic reviews have confirmed no significant changes to the structure or scoring are required, even as the skills required of professional services staff have fundamentally shifted. Digital expertise, regulatory knowledge and data literacy barely featured in professional services work three decades ago. A recent scoping review of job evaluation research found that empirical studies on validity and effectiveness have declined sharply since 2010 and no recent research examines whether higher education job evaluation achieves its intended outcomes for pay equity or workforce development.[37]

This is an area where collaborative sector-wide work could yield significant returns and we return to it in our recommendations.

But even well-designed jobs will fail if they are not adequately resourced. Workload management requires systematic approaches, not reliance on individual goodwill. Managers need frameworks for assessing capacity, prioritising work, challenging unrealistic expectations and protecting recovery time.

Buurtzorg: what happens when job design builds in recovery

Buurtzorg, the Dutch home care provider, offers a striking example. Its productivity threshold requires nursing teams to spend at least 62% of their time on billable patient care – no more. The remaining 38% is treated as essential capacity for peer coaching, team decisions, self-directed learning and knowledge sharing across 900 teams.

The results challenge performance models that prioritise visible outputs over other facets of performance. Patient satisfaction runs 30% higher than comparators. Staff turnover, absenteeism and overhead costs are up to two-thirds lower. A KPMG study found that patients require care for shorter periods and regain independence faster, meaning better outcomes at lower total cost – despite the lower proportion of time spent on billable work.[38]

2. Implement digital systems with staff, not to them

Survey respondents were clear about what makes digital change succeed or fail: early involvement; transparent communication; adequate training; and job security guarantees during transitions. When staff are treated as people who understand processes and can identify improvements, digital change creates value. This means establishing staff-led working groups with authority to identify automation opportunities, design new processes and lead their adoption. It means building capability internally rather than relying on external consultants. And it means guaranteeing that staff who help automate their own roles will benefit through development, redeployment or enhanced responsibilities – not face redundancy.

Procurement decisions should involve frontline users, not just technical specialists and senior managers. Implementation should allow time for testing, adjustment and proper training, and support should continue after launch. That means sustained investment beyond initial rollout, and communities of practice where staff share learning.

Welsh Health and Social Care: investing in digital leadership

The University of South Wales created a Master's in Leading Digital Transformation for Health and Social Care, funded by the Welsh Government. The two-year programme focuses on leadership, innovation and technology, helping leaders understand digital without becoming technical experts themselves. Students are coached to challenge their thinking and draw on research in their proposals.

The results speak clearly: 108 students across Wales's health trusts have graduated. To date, the programme has generated 99 applied research projects that have made a measurable difference to NHS Wales, with savings of £10.4 million.[39]

Perhaps most valuably, the programme creates a community of practice. Students share experiences across organisations.

3. Develop managers who can lead people, navigate change and run services

Our review of annual reports shows growing investment in management development. This is welcome. But the content of development matters as much as its existence, and the evidence points to three areas where focused investment would make the most difference.

- **Good people management**. Managers need practical skills in prioritising work, managing capacity, conducting performance reviews that genuinely develop people and holding career conversations that connect to real opportunities. This requires being honest about what opportunities exist within an institution, connecting staff to the right people and resources and avoiding the common failure of raising aspirations without any means of acting on them. Research on career conversations in higher education shows line managers generally feel equipped to hold development discussions but lack organisational infrastructure behind them – policies, processes and real opportunities that staff can act upon.[40] Without that infrastructure, even well-intentioned managers will disappoint. The gap between what managers are asked to do and what they are equipped to do will widen unless institutions treat people management as a skill requiring structured development.

- **Managing change and uncertainty**. Respondents describe sustained pressure rather than short-term disruption: repeated restructurings, shifting expectations and a lack of clarity about future direction. The pace of change will not slow. Managing change well means early and honest communication, realistic timescales and acknowledgement of uncertainty. It means structured consultation where staff input shapes decisions.

Building change capability

When a university restructured in 2025 its People and Culture team treated the process as an opportunity to build lasting management capability, not just manage an immediate crisis.

The university combined leadership training, mental health support, inclusive redeployment processes and staff wellbeing provision during the restructure. Underpinning all of this was a new Leadership Framework, now embedded in job descriptions, appraisals and recruitment – so the behaviours required to lead change are treated as a standing expectation rather than a one-off.

- **Managing operational delivery**. This is where management development is weakest. Providers run complex operations – admissions cycles, student records, timetabling, estates, finance, research administration – yet few invest in operations management skills. The consequence is that institutions cannot define their services, measure whether they work, plan capacity or hold anyone accountable for outcomes. This is the same gap that undermines outsourcing contracts and drives the workload crises staff describe. One respondent captured the problem:

> *We have a lot of broken processes and inefficiencies. Every time we make salami-slicing cuts to staff, it gets worse … We CAN unlock that capacity, but it requires continuous improvement roles – which have been made redundant.*

NHS IMPACT: treating operational management as a professional skill

The NHS faces a comparable challenge. Its IMPACT Operational Improvement Training Programme, launched by NHS England, provides structured development for clinical and operational managers in skills they were never formally taught: identifying systemic problems; using data to drive improvement; planning capacity; allocating resources; and embedding changes so they last. The programme treats operational management as a professional skill requiring formal development, provides it free to participants as essential infrastructure and leads to professional accreditation.[41]

Capable workforces need capable managers, and capable managers need more than leadership theory.

4. Build career frameworks with real infrastructure

Professional and support staff need career frameworks that recognise multiple forms of progression – not just moving up grades – but developing expertise, leading projects, working across boundaries and supporting colleagues.

Clearer career pathways are not about creating closed linear pipelines, but are about raising the esteem of professional services work, improving training and development and making pathways visible, navigable and inspiring. Well-designed frameworks equip staff to move within and beyond higher education, progress within it and contribute value to it.

Structured training that builds the capabilities institutions need matters and can be achieved through low-cost and effective approaches like shadowing, joining project teams, internal skills-sharing sessions, job rotation, project leadership and action learning. Several universities have built strong development cultures around these methods.

Mentoring and coaching give staff individual support. Sourced externally, both are expensive and tend to reach only those whose managers already invest in them. Building internal capacity changes this: programmes that train staff as mentors and coaches make this support available more widely and at lower cost.

Development cannot rely on staff fitting learning around expanding workloads in their own time. This means setting minimum investment per employee and protecting funding even during financial downturns. It means managers having explicit conversations about workload before agreeing development activities, and providing cover so development becomes possible rather than theoretical. When sizing a role, training and development time should be accounted for, as opposed to being negotiated after a person is appointed. It becomes an entitlement then, as opposed to a possibility.

Most providers have some of these components. Few have built them as connected infrastructure, which requires commitment not just to the principle of career development but to the resources and processes that make it real.

University of Leeds: building career pathways for support staff

Leeds experienced turnover rates of 5% to 8% annually for staff in grades 3 to 5, with each department recruiting independently. The University fundamentally changed its approach. Rather than filling individual vacancies, Leeds now recruits cohorts of grade 4 staff. These cohorts train together and rotate through different parts of the University, developing an understanding of various functions and departments. In partnership with Multiverse, the University provides digital skills training that includes mini-projects, made possible by creating more consistent job roles and a competency framework.

Universities sit in an unusual position. They have direct access to a large, skilled and curious workforce that most employers would pay handsomely to recruit. Students on campus have specialist technical skills, such as in data analysis, programming and research methods, that many professional services teams lack and struggle to hire. Yet few institutions treat their own student body as a source of future professional services talent.

Student placements within professional services teams offer a two-way return. Teams gain fresh skills and direct insight into how services are experienced. Students gain a realistic picture of what professional careers inside universities look like. Where placements lead to graduate roles, institutions gain staff who already understand the institution and how it works.

Sector-wide graduate schemes are possible. Ambitious Futures, established in 2012 by the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA), was a shared graduate trainee programme, with trainees completing placements at different universities as part of an 18-month programme. The scheme closed to new entrants in 2020 following the impact of the pandemic and has not yet been revived.

Other sectors show what is possible at scale. The NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme recruits nationally across seven regions, rotating trainees through placements across professional disciplines alongside a postgraduate qualification. The Local Government Impact Programme places graduates across more than 50 councils on two-year rotations covering corporate, frontline and support functions. Both create career paths that span more than one employer, attract talent that might not have considered the sector and spread the cost of structured development across many hosts.

Reviving something equivalent to Ambitious Futures, or building a bigger successor, would widen the talent pipeline, reduce the burden on individual institutions and signal that professional services careers are worth investing in. Smaller institutions, which cannot sustain standalone graduate programmes, could benefit most.

5. Create fair and transparent reward structures

Levelling benefits up across staff groups is not realistic in the current financial climate. Levelling them down is the wrong answer. But institutions can act without large additional costs.

Only 9% of providers issue total reward statements that explain the full value of what staff receive.[42] Making benefits visible, comparable and understood would cost little but could shift how staff perceive their rewards – particularly for those who do not realise the monetary value of pension contributions or sick pay entitlements relative to other sectors.

Greater transparency is not enough on its own. Institutions should explain gaps between staff groups, justify them honestly and commit publicly to protecting the floor – refusing to use subsidiary structures or outsourcing as a route to eroding terms for new entrants. Financial pressure is real, but allowing it to deepen inequality between colleagues doing comparable work carries a reputational cost.

Pay floors and benefit structures set the baseline, but fairness is also felt more immediately in the relationship between effort, responsibility and reward.

Workload is where this unfairness is most acutely felt. When teams shrink but the work does not, pay that once felt reasonable can quickly feel unjust, not because the rate has changed but because the role has. Institutions need honest regular processes for reviewing whether what a role demands, in scope and in volume, still matches what it pays.

It also means becoming better at describing the value professional and support staff deliver, which is collective rather than individual and embedded in how well services run rather than traceable to a single person. Recognition systems built around individual contribution will not capture that value. Providers need approaches that work at team level as well as individual level.

For many professional and support staff, performance review is either absent, perfunctory or disconnected from reward. A culture where good work is noticed, named and rewarded, and where honest conversations about contribution are normal rather than threatening, underpins effective reward structures. Through regular practice and effective training, both managers and reports develop the skills and confidence to have discussions where performance and behaviours are recognised and there is clear accountability.

University of East London: linking reward to performance

UEL runs a performance and recognition scheme that directly links staff rewards to individual, team and institutional achievement. The university achieved an appraisals participation rate (99%) that most institutions struggle to reach.

The scheme is discretionary and non-contractual and varies depending on organisational priorities and financial conditions. In 2024/25 staff have been able to earn up to £5,000 in additional non-contractual pay through four tiers:

1. Organisational achievement: When the university meets its income targets, every eligible member of staff receives a bonus (in 2025, £1,000) paid at the end of December
2. Team objectives: Awards for meeting collective goals
3. Individual performance: Linked to appraisal outcomes, which range from 'requires improvement' to 'exceptional'
4. Exceptional contribution: Recognition for work that extends beyond or outside normal role requirements

The scheme deliberately uses flat-rate payments that represent a larger proportion of income for lower-paid staff.

The university describes its approach as demanding and caring simultaneously – setting high standards while supporting staff to meet them. The framework has attracted sector attention, earning a nomination for an HR Excellence Award for Best Reward and Recognition Strategy.

These principles work as a system. But making these principles work also requires something beyond policy and process. It requires leaders to examine the institutional culture they preside over – one that in many providers still treats academic and 'non-academic' as separate worlds, with different standing, different expectations and different claims on investment. Bridging that divide is not a matter of rhetoric. It means including professional services leaders in strategic decisions, valuing operational expertise alongside academic distinction and building a single institutional identity in which all staff see themselves. The culture a provider creates for its staff is as much a measure of its values as the education it offers its students.

Chapter 9: Beyond individual institutions

The five principles above describe what providers can do on their own. But several of the problems identified in this report require action from sector bodies, regulators and government. Five recommendations follow.

1. Review the job evaluation framework. The HERA system struggles to recognise specialist expertise. The Educational Competencies Consortium, working with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) and trade unions through the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES), should commission an independent review to:

- examine how well the scheme captures contemporary skills; and
- evaluate whether the framework delivers the pay equity it was designed to achieve

2. Require separate gender pay gap reporting for professional services and academic staff. Current reports combine all staff into a single figure. Institutions should report pay gaps separately for academic and professional services workforces. Institutions that employ lower-paid staff through subsidiary companies should publish combined figures. The Office for Students should require institutions to report the figures in their Annual Equality Report, and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association should adopt it as standard practice in its annual pay data collection.

3. Fix the data. The sector lacks basic information about its own workforce. HESA collects detailed data on academic staff. For professional and support staff, the picture is less detailed.[43] It is difficult to track what roles people hold, what skills they have, how they progress or what training they receive. Staff employed through subsidiary companies or outsourced contracts disappear from the data altogether –

yet the report has shown that these arrangements affect thousands of workers and carry significant consequences for pay, conditions and institutional reputation.

Three changes are needed:

- regulators should make reporting on non-academic staff compulsory again;
- HESA should extend data collection to staff in subsidiary companies and outsourced services, just as HESA already requires providers to report supplier carbon output under net-zero obligations;
- the categories used should capture a fuller picture of professional services roles, skills and progression – without this, neither institutions nor policymakers can make evidence-based decisions.

4. Create a What Works programme for provider workforce development. There is little systematic evidence of what works in developing professional and support staff in higher education. A What Works centre for higher education workforce development, established as part of the What Works Network, would begin to build that evidence base.

The centre's initial work should focus on what the sector needs: independent evaluation of different approaches to job evaluation and pay fairness; evidence on career development models for professional and support staff; and evaluation of the change management programmes that universities routinely commission. Over time, it could develop the kind of toolkit infrastructure that has made TASO so useful to practitioners – concrete, accessible evidence on what interventions improve outcomes.

The Office for Students already funds a What Works centre for higher education, which operated on a total income of £1.77 million in the year to March 2025. Set against that, analysis of the published accounts of 118 providers found £442 million spent on compensation for loss of office in 2024/25, affecting 16,800 staff, an increase of 83% on the previous year. Providers are already spending at scale on change nobody evaluates. A mixed funding model is realistic, with contributions from sector bodies, providers and private sector partners with a stake in higher education efficiency, alongside the Department for Education or the Office for Students.[44]

5. Remove the VAT barrier to shared services. Higher education providers must charge each other VAT on services that would be VAT-free if delivered in-house. This creates an artificial cost penalty that makes collaboration more expensive. HM Treasury should examine how VAT rules could be amended to enable universities to share professional services functions on a comparable footing to in-house delivery. The British Universities Finance Directors Group (BUFDG) – the representative body for higher education finance staff – has developed proposals for how this can be done.[45]

Universities are made up of their people. It is time to invest in all of them.

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Making life simple for our community

The majority of staff in UK universities are not academics. They are instead working in 'professional services' roles. They manage finances, maintain buildings, support students, administer research grants, ensure legal compliance, run IT systems and handle recruitment, among many other roles. Without them, no modern university could run properly.

Yet the working conditions, salaries and wellbeing of professional services staff rarely get the attention they deserve. So this report focuses on what professional services staff do, how they are treated and what needs to happen to improve their working lives.

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