Time to re-think the academic vs support staff divide

Maria Cruz, Senior Policy Officer, NWO
Marta Teperek, Head of Research Data Services at TU Delft
& Director of 4TU.ResearchData

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Research professionals are split into categories

The academics

- *the intellectual capital of research institutions*

Support staff

- *do whatever needs to be done to support the academics*

The heroes of science

Universities have made progress historically by supporting scholars to become experts.

"The leading scholar in a given area of research is the acknowledged head of that group and has ownership of a pyramid of resources dedicated to his or her topic."

The heroes of science

"Heroes are seen as the moral leadership of their universities and even society at large."

"Heroes are often given sole credit for (...) extraordinary technological transformations (...)."

Time to Say Goodbye to Our Heroes? By Lindy Elkins-Tanton

Replacing heroes with teams

Research and innovation need a diverse range of roles, skills and contributions.

- ○ Data Stewards
- ○ Research Software Engineers
- ○ Librarians
- ○ IT and legal specialists
- ○ Community managers
- ○ ......

Embracing a culture of collaboration

"We need to create highly values-led, collaborative academic communities which feel a sense of shared purpose around research, teaching and societal impact."

"We should be communities where all colleagues feel rewarded and recognised, whether they are professional services and support staff, or academics, be that researchers or teachers."

- Simone Buitendijk VC Leeds University, [reflecting on the role of universities and transforming the culture around research](#)
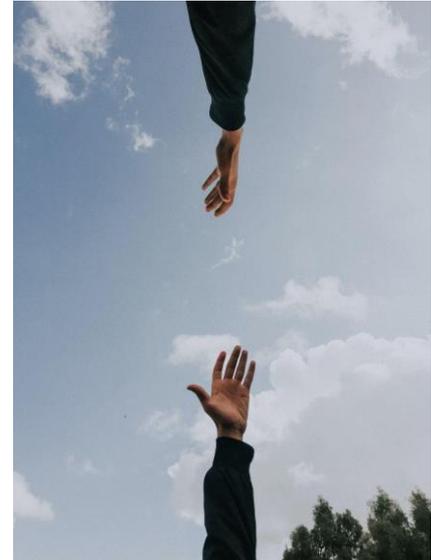
The divide is not conducive to collaboration and partnership

1. Support staff roles often seen as the 'second' category of staff

"I come from a research background [PostDoc]. Academic research culture valued the research pipeline so higgly that young researchers are made to feel that they have failed in their career if they choose to change career paths to a more supportive role. These supportive roles are not valued and the ideas of the respective personnel are therefore not always considered, which is an ultimate loss for the research institution when they have good ideas - (Manager)"

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3. Regulations around visas are often different for academic and support staff

Is any of you from outside the EU?

The divide is not conducive to collaboration and partnership

1. Support staff roles often seen as the 'second' category of staff
2. Support staff is often not allowed to supervise students and scientists
3. Regulations around visas are often different for academic and support staff
4. Remuneration is often different for academic and support staff

Some funders have caps on salaries of support staff (lower than for academic staff)
Consequently, highly skilled staff sometimes cannot be hired.

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2. Support staff is often not allowed to supervise students and scientists
3. Regulations around visas are often different for academic and support staff
4. Remuneration is often different for academic and support staff
5. Support staff cannot apply for grants

It is essential to innovate and do research to acquire evidence into what kind of services are useful and valued by the end users, or to do research on relevant topics (e.g. incentives, cultural change, digital competencies etc.)

However, there is a strong disincentive for research support staff to apply for grants or to do research.

Time for change

1. Allow support staff to supervise students and scientists
2. Unify visas and remuneration regulations for academic and support staff
3. Allow support staff to apply for grants

Rethinking the divide: what does it mean?

Research institutions will still have professionals responsible for doing research, and for supporting researchers.

What hinders the quality of the research process is not the existence of distinct job profiles and varying responsibilities, but the artificial constraints imposed on the different types of professionals.

Rethinking the divide: what does it mean?

To facilitate a successful and effective research process, research institutions need to foster collaborative environments that enable problem solving and building together in mutual trust and respect for each other's skills and expertise, regardless of job titles and perceived ranking and status within the organisation.

Thank you

m.cruz@nwo.nl
@gravana

m.teperek@tudelft.nl
@martateperek