

Secretaries' and Administrators' Work and Social Relations

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Morning, Professor Lapping.

Morning Maureen. What on earth's happened to the window? It's all steamed up.

It's Christmas frost. It says 'HAPPY CHRISTMAS'.

So it does. Well, must rush.

Professor Lapping, on the subject of Christmas, might I bother you for your twelve pounds.

Twelve pounds!

For the Staff Christmas Dinner at Giovanni's.

Have you mentioned this before?

Five times.

And twelve pounds is right? It seems an awful lot. I have a figure of ten pounds in my head.

That was senior lecturers and readers. Professors are twelve pounds. By a vote of 8-1.

Has everybody else paid?

Oh yes.

Well, there we are then.

And while you're here, Professor Lapping, may I also take the £5 for the cleaners?

Cleaners?

The people who go round the offices before you arrive in the morning and do the cleaning. We call them 'cleaners'.

I could swear I gave to the cleaners just yesterday. About five pounds.

No, that would have been the *four* pounds you gave to Doctor Quintock for the surprise secretarial present.

Surprise secretarial present?

My annual bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream.

I'll tell you something, Maureen, what with one thing and another this Christmas can turn out to be a pretty demanding business.

Demanding is the word, Professor Lapping.

(Taylor, L. Times Higher, December 10, 1993)

This paper seeks to explore several aspects of the work and social relationships of secretaries and administrators within universities. We do this primarily through analysis of 22 interviews in one English university and reflection on our own experiences of secretaries' and administrators' work over a number of years. In interpreting this account it is necessary to place it within the context of developments within universities in general over at least the last decade. Further, some of the distinctive features of the particular university where the study took place need to be indicated so that some judgement can be made about the degree of representativeness and significance of our description.

Many studies and commentators (Thorne and Cuthbert 1996, Barnett 1996, Dept of Education and Science 1985, 1987, 1991, Halsey 1992, Miller 1994, 1996, 1995, Scott 1995 and Tapper and Salter 1992) are agreed that there have been distinctive political, economic and ideological factors operating throughout the United Kingdom in the 1980's and 1990's which have affected the governance, administration and functioning of universities. The dominant political current has been that of the conservative new-right which has combined an allegiance to free market economics and privatisation with strong state intervention in areas of social policy, including education in general, and universities. The balance of emphasis has varied, but university administrations have had to play close attention to shifts in government policy on such things as admission targets, fees and balance between preferred subjects, as well as competing in the market with other institutions. The economic and financial parameters have varied a little depending on the growth or recession but, more importantly, have flowed from the political attitude of government towards public expenditure. In general there has been retrenchment on universities' expenditure. As a % of G.N.P. Britain is lowest of O.E.C.D. countries for expenditure on tertiary institutions and for staff remuneration per student (Williams 1996), while at the same time UK participation in higher education is now amongst the highest in the O.E.C.D. Universities are being required to educate and train more students and conduct more research (particularly that which relates to the needs of the economy) with comparatively fewer resources. In practice this has meant there has been a steady decline in the unit of resource for each student, worsening staff-student ratios and increasing class sizes.

Ideologically a discourse has developed, influenced by the political and economic language of the now not so new 'new right'. This emphasises, on the one hand, traditional, conservative values and suspicion of liberal or critical humanities and social science, and on the other hand,

and probably more importantly, celebrates the value of the market and business organisation.

At the same time there has been an increased emphasis on accountability which has various facets relating to the spending of public moneys, the maintenance of standards and the meeting of consumer (student or business) needs.

The convergence and interplay of these pressures on university administrations has had its effect in changing the ways in which universities are managed and students treated, and this in turn is likely to have influenced the way in which secretaries and administrators carry out their work.

At the university level a more managerialist approach to university government and administration indicated by the Jarratt Report (1985) have become apparent in the last decade. Harrison, a chair of the C.V.C.P. in 1991, noted that 'most of those involved in the management of UK universities would not have made frequent use of the terms "cost-effectiveness" or "efficiency" before the start of the 1980's. Indeed even the word 'management" itself was generally avoided in the university context until fairly recently during the 1960's and 1970's the rhetoric was primarily that of "quality" and "academic freedom" rather than "management and efficiency" (Harrison 1991).

There is clearly a range of difference in the degree of identification and commitment to a managerial mode by different Vice Chancellors and senior managers, administrators and academics in different universities. Increased student numbers, funding which is not keeping pace with expansion, increased competition for research funds and pressure from the government and quasi-state agencies like funding and research councils, however, all make planning, developing strategy and increasing effective managerial procedures a dominant part of the culture of most UK universities.

One of the features of the demands of management and administration in the 1980's and 1990's is its increasing density and complexity. There is across the university sector an overlay of different structures and pressures. Firstly, there is a departmental, school, research institute and faculty administrative system focussed on heads of departments, directors of schools and institutes and deans, all with their own sets of committees. Secondly, there is a collegial system of academic assemblies, senates and councils with associated committees, minutes and papers. Thirdly, there is often a developing central management system with increasingly powerful vice-chancellors acting as chief executives with their senior management team of administrators and academic managers often appointing working groups and task forces which may by-pass or only partly affiliate with established academic and administrative structures. Increasingly, crucial strategic decisions, particularly financial ones - but flowing from them decisions on staffing, student recruitment and research profile - have been concentrated with central management. This does not mean, however, that junior academic staff, still less administrators or secretaries, can get on unaffected with their primary tasks of teaching and research, or servicing these activities.

Administrators and secretaries operate at the intersection of sometimes conflicting pressures and procedures. There is increasing pressure from the state, mediated by agencies and the universities' own senior management, for increased accountability and value for money. This manifests itself in the everyday work of all staff in universities (academics, administrators and secretaries) in terms of providing data on research and teaching, planning and marketing courses, ensuring quality, developing research strategies, making research applications, raising and saving money and monitoring the use of resources. While, on the one hand, central management may be effectively increasing control there is, on the other hand, often a strategy of devolving certain functions to the departmental level.

The University

The university in which the research is being carried out has its own specific character and history which has affected the work of academics, administrators, secretaries and even students in specific ways. We are not arguing that the institution is typical or average - although some features are probably both. In many ways it has been quite distinctive, not least in terms of its small size and distinctive management style. It is difficult to assess whether it is an extreme case heralding the future, or merely an odd or maverick case which may still illuminate a more general picture. In any case, many of its features - budget pressures, reduced resources, increased student numbers, restructuring, redundancies and increased work load - are recognisable features for most UK universities.

This university is one of the group of ex-colleges of technology established as universities in the mid 1960's. It had a pattern of development involving expansion and diversification not dissimilar to the rest of the group until the early 1980's. Then, however, the conjunction of very large U.G.C. cuts (32% in 1981) and the implementation of a specific managerial strategy by a then new vice-chancellor who retired in 1996, led to this university having a somewhat distinctive experience in terms of the work experience of academics, administrators and secretaries, probably the most important feature of which has been three major waves of redundancies. The first wave occurred in the period from 1980 to 1985. The student population was cut by a fifth, but the academic staff were reduced by nearly a half from 543 in 1980 to 276 in 1985. Since then there has been some small increase in academic staff and student numbers have increased in the last five years. The reduction in academic staff in the early 1980's was accompanied by massive restructuring. In 1980 the university had four faculties made up of twenty four departments and groups. By 1989 there were three faculties and only nine departments. The scale of disruption, restructuring and redundancy experienced

by academic staff in the early 1980's has been replicated for administrative, secretarial and other support staff in the 1990's. There have been two periods of considerable support staff cuts in 1992/93 and 1996. These two major waves of redundancies and restructuring in recent years have affected all support staff, technicians, librarians, computer staff, porters, maintenance, estate and cleaning staff as well as administrators and secretaries. The redundancies and redeployment had significant effects on work patterns and outlook of the remaining support staff.

Job evaluation was introduced in the university in 1988 and involved management and union representatives assessing the work characteristics of administrative and secretarial staff, introducing new job descriptions and grading with implications for pay. In 1987 discretionary awards for academic and academic related staff were introduced at the behest of the ministry, as part of the salary award. They were required to be given to less than half the staff eligible in any one section and were supposed to relate to market conditions and/or merit and performance. These arrangements were extended to other support staff in some departments more recently. This somewhat invidious system has involved departmental heads, in some cases advised by other senior staff, selecting a minority of staff for annual merit awards or in some cases placing them on a higher salary range for a limited period. Discussion over criteria, procedures and fairness of outcomes, and indeed the system itself, has now become one of the features of the work culture of secretaries, as it has been for academics and administrators for rather longer.

Technology

Over the last decade there has been generally an increase in the range, complexity and power of communications technology. This manifests itself, for example, in widespread use of video, near universal access to telephones with increasing use of answering machines and mobile

phones. Within the university there has been increased use of overhead projectors in lectures and copying systems for producing handouts. The increased availability of personal computers means that not only do all secretaries and administrators have access to them but so do practically all academics and students. There has been a steady increase in the proportion of academics and students with sufficient keyboard skills to produce their own work. Thus, while a small proportion of academics (including one of the authors) may rely on secretaries to type up manuscripts, most now produce their own documents but may use secretaries for producing final polished versions e.g. conference papers, articles or reports. Fax externally and then e-mail both internally and externally have become an important communication channel, but this has only partially displaced personal face to face phone and memo contact, so that the overall volume of communication has increased.

Theory and Method

Delamott (1996) has pointed out that there is relatively little research on women (Aisenberg and Harrington 1988) and still less on the two thirds of workers other than academics who work in universities. This paper is a contribution to remedy this deficiency. The approach of the two authors and our interpretation of the interview material is shaped by discipline backgrounds, theoretical perspective and experience as academic and administrator. One of us has a background in English literature and history and has researched images of female domestic labour in 19th century Britain. The other author is a sociologist and has carried out research using interview material and case studies on the management of change in universities. We share an approach which in sociological terms could be described as Weberian, which expects that individual and groups in an institution such as a university will have different interests, agendas and expectations and that these may be accommodated through compromise, but which may also express conflicts which remain unresolved at least in

the short run. We have attempted through talking to and listening to secretaries and administrators, reflecting on our own work experience and analysing aspects of this to catch something of the work experience and social relations of secretaries and administrators as they are experienced and understood by the actors concerned. Maybe this approach and the subjects approximate to those advocated by Delamott (1996), in that we have focussed on a group so far underresearched in universities - female secretaries and administrators and attempted to make the familiar, unfamiliar.

The formal job titles are academic related and secretarial/clerical. We have sometimes used this terminology, which is certainly important in designating pay, conditions and responsibilities, as well as categories of staff organised by different unions (the A.U.T for academic related and U.N.I.S.O.N. for secretaries/clerical). We also refer to academic and secretarial staff as part of more general descriptions which relate less to the formal grade and more to common descriptions in the university which roughly correspond to the nature of the position and associated work. We recognise however (and it became clear from interviews), that administrative (academic-related) staff do undertake some secretarial and clerical work and secretaries (secretarial/clerical) workers do undertake some administrative work.

We have drawn on our own experience (11 and 25 years at this university) and observation of work and social relations amongst and between secretaries, administrators, academics, students and university management. We also use material drawn from interviews with 22 secretaries and administrators across a range of departments, faculties and functions. Six of the staff interviewed currently work in central services, while the remaining 16 are situated within departments. We talked to ten members of academic related (administrative) staff ranging from grade 1 to grade 5 and 12 secretarial/clerical staff on clerical grades 3, 4, and 5. (See Appendix 1) The interviews, generally lasting 45 minutes, were conducted between June

and November 1996. Interviewees had already received a letter outlining our project and requesting an interview, some further explanation and assurances on confidentiality and anonymity were given and they were asked if they objected to the interview being tape recorded - all agreed. Five interviews were conducted by both of us, twelve by the administrator and five by the academic alone. We used a prompt sheet (see appendix 2) to produce a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were conducted either in the interviewees own office or in one of ours. We have yet to complete interviewing our original panel and we have delivered a copy of this paper to all those interviewed for comment and correction.

Qualifications

We were interested in the educational background of our interviewees and its influence on their work at the University. We asked them to talk about their education and the extent to which they believed it had an impact on their work and social relations. Two main themes emerged - a debate on the usefulness of higher education, particularly for academic related staff for whom at this university a first degree is a prerequisite and, against this, the extent to which commonsense and work experience were more use than any formal education. The importance that a knowledge of basic secretarial/keyboard skills had for these senior secretaries and administrators was also explored.

All staff interviewed, except one, had taken formal qualifications, to at least A-level standard or equivalent. All had then gone on to gain further qualifications. Almost exclusively this consisted of practical secretarial qualifications at some stage in their career (RSA, Pitman, Advanced Secretarial Certificates, Diplomas for Bilingual Secretaries and PAs, Graduate Secretarial Courses etc.) In many cases both administrators and secretaries had also undertaken post A-level study. This was often a first degree in a variety of subjects. Amongst

the academic related staff, the statutory degree had in some cases also been supplemented by a range of further qualifications, notably MBAs and other masters level degrees, as well as doctorates and professional qualifications such as Diplomas from the Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD) and Chartered Secretaries and Administrators.

The importance of keyboard skills was unanimously endorsed by all our interviewees. To many these skills had been "a useful door opener" which had got them on the first rung of the ladder to the more interesting jobs that they had had subsequently. In this sense the skills were regarded as a means rather than an end in themselves. It was acknowledged by all interviewees that the use of office technology was a skill which they all used in their day to day work. Specific qualifications and skills, such as good, fast, accurate typing and the ability to carry out related secretarial duties were seen as being more important by secretarial staff, for whom it formed the basis for most of their duties. Even among these staff, however, shorthand skills were not always seen as important or desirable. Most staff did not use them (indeed the administrators said they had purposely lost their shorthand ability as soon as possible), but some of those who did, bemoaned the passing of academic staff who had the ability to dictate fluently or the time, which was now seen as being more profitably used by audio work. There was also the feeling that "maybe it does represent a certain relationship with the boss" - "a one to one relationship" - which, with the reduction of support staff and the growing complexities of administrative life, was often a luxury which could no longer be afforded. Very few of the secretarial staff we interviewed were working for just one member of staff.

Having opened initial doors, many interviewees saw their knowledge of new technology as a great bonus. Not being frightened of computers and office technology was often cited as a way in which these support staff had the edge (and thus the power) over other sections of staff

- notably academics - who had not the experience or the formal training in this area. Administrators acknowledged that it was the combination of their degree-level qualifications with their knowledge of keyboard/IT skills which had got them their posts and allowed them to carry out their duties more effectively. Our interviews gave the impression that the advantage secretaries and administrators have is breaking down in this area. More and more academics, students and technical staff share this facility to use IT, and are not so reliant on support staff for their unique skills in this area as before.

One of the debates which emerged from the interviews was that of the usefulness of degree-level qualifications. This was a live issue for clerical/secretarial staff without a degree because it barred them from becoming administrators (one member of staff had undertaken a degree to move to an academic related job), but also amongst administrators, because this was often the only aspect which separated their work from clerical/secretarial colleagues. A number of secretarial/clerical staff also had degrees. There was little strong feeling that a degree was really essential even to administrators but there was substantial agreement that a degree helps in indirect ways. For example, having an insight into how higher education works and what it was like to be a student was seen as advantageous. There were less tangible ways in which a degree was important, because it "makes you think in different ways", nothing directly relevant in terms of specific qualifications, but "because it teaches you to think, and work on you own, you can write, and use research skills". It gives a level of intellectual confidence which you need "because you are thrown in at the deep end".

Only one person said that her degree was directly relevant in itself. "It was useful", she said, "studying history because you do at least have some experience of working with large amounts of material, teasing out information". One area in which having a degree was acknowledged as an advantage was in relating to academic members of staff. "It may be a bit

snobbish", said one member of secretarial staff with a degree "but they can relate to you more because.... you have an insight into their work". Another interviewee told us how she had gained credibility when academic staff found out that she had a degree. "I didn't know you had a degree", they had said to her, "It is as if you step up in their estimation". There was also an acknowledgement from those who had higher degrees that one reason for doing this was to give them credibility amongst the academic community.

Universities set much store by paper qualifications, because that is a major part of their purpose. The majority of secretarial staff interviewed said that too much attention was paid to such qualifications, and there was also a measure of agreement on this from academic related staff. The attitude that "she must be bright" because she has plenty of academic qualifications was criticised. Academic related staff told us that there are people who have the right amount of ability, but lack the paper qualifications, and it is wrong that they can't be academic related. Secretarial staff spoke fervently about the issue that some of their highly qualified colleagues haven't got the sense they were born with "only a secretary would understand that really". Common sense and experience were seen as having far more influence over the ability to do their jobs well than any other factor. A number of secretarial staff were cited who could "knock the spots off a graduate when it comes to having practical common sense". Many staff believed that on the job experience which they had built up cumulatively over many years helped them greatly in their work.

Although it was clear from our interviews that such experience must be very important, an overview of the conversations leads us to believe that our interviewees may have underestimated the importance of their academic qualifications. In the increasingly complex world of higher education the abilities that the interviewees acknowledge often came from their education, particularly at first degree-level and above, would seem to be desirable for

today's junior and middle managers in universities. The difference of attitude between those we interviewed with and without a degree was that the latter normally had a greater understanding of the issues around their work and the values of their 'customers', both staff and students. As one interviewee put it, her qualification was "more useful than you can imagine" in terms of understanding what you are supporting. It had been easier for her to rate academic staff according to how quickly they responded to her processes or her memos, and now academics were seen in a new light - carrying out challenging roles in front of demanding students. It is this shared understanding which appears to allow such staff to carry out their work more effectively.

Work

Even within our relatively small sample there are quite a wide range of work situations and levels of satisfaction. A departmental or group secretary working for a head of department with maybe 10 - 20 academics in the department all making demands is in a rather different situation to someone working alone in a central or school office, with a specific service function. The responsibilities, powers, work and social situation of administrators is in varying degree different from secretarial staff.

The work situation can be understood along a number of dimensions. There is the activity itself, using the phone, word-processing, organising meetings, interacting with students, academics and other secretaries and administrators, and a range of more specialised activities. The work can also be seen in its physical and social setting in terms of the size, location and organisation of the office and its accessibility to others. There is also the role that the secretary or administrator is expected to play vis-à-vis other members of the institution within the structure of power and authority. These may include among others service provider, organiser, disciplinarian and confidant. All these aspects are structured by and reflected in the

organisation of time at work in terms of the length of the day, full-time and part-time, continuing or short term contracts. The density of the work activity within the specified time, the number and length of spaces for relaxation and sociability e.g. coffee breaks also varied.

Some aspects, apparently outside the immediate sphere of work, may nevertheless be important in affecting the involvement and orientations to the work. Here, family situation, whether single or married, with or without children, the age of the children and whether or not the university worker is the sole or main breadwinner all affect how the work is seen, not only in relation to the remuneration package, but also in terms of time available and conflicting demands on peoples' involvement and energy.

One account, provided mainly by one of our interviewees of the work situation of a departmental/group secretary gives something of the range of factors operating and how they are experienced.

The secretary (grade 3) works for a relatively small group of ten academic staff active in varying degrees in teaching, research, administration and consultancy. She reflects on her situation thus

"I am all for girls getting on but their expectations have been raised and people going into secretarial work think that they can be administrators, there is no office junior, nor shorthand typist or copy typist, no secretary hardly. They are all PAs - you have got to have people who are prepared to do everything. I've suffered from temps' who didn't want to do the normal dreary stuff. With the cutbacks with staff people are going to get frustrated with what they have to do. - the things above the call of duty are often the most interesting. You have to be prepared to do absolutely everything according to who you work for".

She sees herself as a "buffer between them and other academics, students and the outside world".

Her work depends on the time of year, in term time there is much more student contact, about one fifth of her time. She is working for 10 people and they all use her in completely different

ways. Some staff give her hand-written material - she then gives it back to them on a disc for them to work on. Others give her work on a disc and others hardly give her any typing at all.

"There is a lot of pushing, chasing and chivvying. Lots of arranging meetings. They arrange travel themselves"

She likes working at the university, particularly in her department. She likes the support staff.

"There is a very good feeling amongst all the women and I don't think I have just been lucky".

But the only reason that she keeps doing the job is that "I need the money". She is not going for a career path.

She says "Basically the job is the same as it would be anywhere - answering the phone, typing, doing some admin. of a not very interesting nature". She continued "What makes it is the comfortable surrounding, the fabulous office" and she "gets on well with the quirky mob of academics". She thinks she is looked on by the rest of the group as 'good old Emma' and often gets the comment 'And this is Emma, she runs (biophysics). She says "They mean it kindly but they don't know how silly it sounds!" She sums up "They are really frustrating to work for but they are very nice".

The physical location of offices and their configuration - small or larger single offices and offices containing several secretaries have their effects in influencing work interactions and the pattern of social contacts with other secretaries and administrators as well as with academic staff and students. Generally administrators will occupy an office on their own, some secretaries do also but most are sharing offices with two or three others, rarely more. The positioning of offices, the presence of closed, open or locked doors and the visibility and accessibility from students and academics moving along corridors will express and reflect patterns of power, authority and control even surveillance. For instance two or more secretaries may be in an office with limited (in time and space) access for students, open

access to academic staff and with an administrator in a nearby office. The administrator, although visibly accessible through a usually, but not always, closed and locked door, is reached via another office inhabited by a secretary who monitors and rations access in a skilful and sensitive way. The secretary is also dealing with academic demands in her own administrative sphere including such crucial things as room bookings and timetable changes. (See Appendix 3)

Departmental and group secretaries often occupy offices where they have to get on with routine typing and administrative tasks for the head of department or group and other academics. But they are also often in space used for sometimes frivolous, informal communication between members of the department and where students make frequent enquiries.

One secretary running a busy office serving two groups said "if somebody [else] told me what the office was like I would think they were exaggerating - some of the students and academics are strange". At the same time she indicated that one of the reasons she liked the job was "the quality of the people I work for". She is general secretary to quite a large group of academics and personal assistant to two heads of groups but

"The rest see me as a personal secretary and so it can become stressful at times. Some are more demanding than others. I have to tell them that is what I'm doing and come back this afternoon and we'll get it sorted. They are quite good and I haven't had a bust up with them. The younger ones are much more independent... but the older ones know how to use a secretary".

While she saw her relationships with other secretaries as being "brilliant" , with other [technical] staff as being "OK", with students "on the whole very good but you do get some stropky ones", with academic staff in general "they are quite good, I've had a couple who have surprised me by discussing things in front of me that I should not really be hearing".

Another group secretary has her own office which has three doors, one on to the corridor and two into adjoining offices. The office is a very public place and she is open to a lot of

interruptions - this is a sensitive issue but she accepts it from the head of department. The office is a centre of communications. As with other group secretaries the post trays are in her office and she keeps a list of where academic staff are going to be during the week. She resents it when members of her group come in and hold chatty conversations amongst themselves when she is trying to take phone calls. Some even settle down and do their own work in her office.

In another office the following description illustrates the obvious connection between physical space and methods of working.

"Always two jobs in this office, at one time when (Francine) was there, there were three people. It has always been a team job. (Kate) [in an adjacent office] also has an open door policy and often I will help her out when there are busy times for her. (Sue) [with an office along the corridor] too is part of the office but her job is very specific."

In general, in departmental offices there is a lot of interaction, mainly with academic staff and students, as well as some with technicians and other secretaries. There is limited office space which is nevertheless large enough to allow staff to brew coffee or tea and chat. The situation of these administrators and secretaries in terms of their immediate work environment, although they are part of a large organisation, is focussed in a designated area unlike workers in a large open plan office.

The Package

We asked staff about the money they were paid for the work they did, and whether they thought that they were adequately rewarded. The results of this survey were revealing in their insights into the priorities of staff who choose to work in universities, given that secretaries and administrators have the transferable skills to work outside the university sector.

No staff interviewed regarded their salaries as extra expendable income, rather that they were making a major contribution to the household income. In some cases the person being interviewed was bringing the sole income into the family. Despite this there were no major

complaints. Most interviewees acknowledged that it would be nice to have more money and some described the remuneration of friends working in the commercial sector, who earned a great deal more. Our interviewees were apparently unambitious about their pay and this may be explained by the fact that they all seemed to be seeking more than just financial satisfaction from their work. What came out strongly from the interviews was the money was regarded as part of what was described to us as "the package" of reward which staff were seeking and in most cases finding. "The package" appears to consist of a combination of pay, status and quality of life. It appears that ambitions about pay are tempered by the compensation of working in an environment which also fulfills other important objectives.

Status comes over as important to a large number of interviewees. Secretarial/clerical staff, in particular, were very status conscious. They appeared acutely aware of the grading structures and of their place within them. The recent job evaluation process appeared to have heightened this awareness, but there was obvious pride in the status they were accorded and the power to influence how things happened and to get things done, particularly as part of a team with academics and other staff (even if they did not usually regard themselves as equal partners). One department secretary told us, for example, that when she was upgraded "it was important to the department to get the recognition of a senior secretary post", - she regarded this as more than just a personal success. Another senior secretary told us that "my job title..... was Executive Officer for Administration and I would not have applied if it had been PA to the Head of Department. There is a stigma attached to being a secretary. I object sometimes to being called a secretary".

Staff often told us that they found satisfaction in the important contribution which they knew they were making to the organisation - whether it be the university as a whole, their department, or a smaller unit within it. There was a strong feeling that they were doing a

worthwhile job, and that their role was appreciated. With this came a strong sense of loyalty towards the institution or, at least the department. Despite the bad press which the institution has sometimes had, the staff we interviewed were loyal to it and particularly to the people within it. One interviewee told us she did not like the university brought into disrepute, "I sometimes think that I'm the only person in this university who enjoys their job. I used to say that I would come even if they didn't pay me". But her words were echoed by many others.

The third important feature of "the package", along with pay and status, was articulated as quality of life. This appeared to mean the personal flexibility, the personal freedom and the pleasant colleagues. Flexibility was regarded as particularly important to staff with families. Features such as the day nursery, variable hours, job share and part time work all featured, and this is discussed in our section on attitudes to the family. Freedom to control ones own working environment and working patterns was one of the most frequently cited satisfactions. Staff valued the control they had over their own time and in how they organised their work. They appreciated being left alone to do their work and to generate their own schedules. They liked the environment in which they worked, many having chosen it after experience in the private sector because it was a more caring and civilised community. Although there was still an awareness and an anxiety about the most recent job cuts, the way the redundancies had been handled was in most cases compared favourably with similar situations they had experienced in industry. One secretary described the kindly role of the university generally in helping staff whose jobs were at risk in terms of practical advice, but this was not a universal experience. Compared with "the outside world" the university came over as a protected and protective environment. Even though it was clear that both secretaries and administrators were under a great deal of stress due to their workload pressures they still felt that they had escaped, what they regarded, as greater pressures in work outside the university. Despite the

short term contracts which many of them were on, and despite the increased workload due to many of the factors described above, they still felt they had a greater level of security at the university. Some of those interviewed had come to work at the university because they "had always liked the idea of working in higher education", or wished to reclaim the memory of time they had enjoyed as a student. Despite the pressures on time, on resources and on them personally, which all staff described, this idealistic image still remained untarnished. We were surprised at this optimism, and the fact that, despite some very perceptive insights into the negative sides of university life in the 90's, there were so few cases where the pressure of work had really got on top of our subjects. There was less trace of the cynicism we had expected, and perhaps this would have been more prevalent if we had interviewed academic staff. Indeed, the secretaries and administrators we interviewed appeared to be a somewhat altruistic group, gaining their satisfaction from non-material things, sharing a sense of pride in the successes of others and of the university/department as a whole. Many of them gained satisfaction from their ability to help other people. "From time to time a little glow of satisfaction" is described "when things are in control or when you help someone", said one administrator, while another described her satisfaction in a "happy team, happy students".

Our interviewees told us that it was the other people working with them who had the greatest influence on creating a good quality of life at the university. There was a strong sense of community - both "a community of supportive women", particularly among secretarial staff, but also of the university or department as a community. We were told that other people were so helpful, so friendly, and so pleasant, and this led us to consider further the social relationships which had built up alongside the more formal working relationships we had begun by asking people to describe.

Social Relationships

We asked our interviewees about the patterns of social relationships with own groups - administrators and secretaries and also with academic staff and students. We were trying to elicit the extent and nature of social relationships and how far they were structured by the work relationship.

In general social relationships were limited in two respects. Firstly, they were structured around the immediate work group, or sometimes including people who had previously been a part of the same group. This sometimes extended beyond the secretarial/administrative groups to include academic staff and postgraduate but never undergraduate students. However this was usually limited to special occasions like departmental Christmas lunch or dinner for all those involved in organising a conference. Secondly, with very few exceptions, work-sociable relations were recorded as much less important than family and friends social occasions which were separate and apart from work and rarely integrated with them. (There were some exceptions - one secretary had been regularly going away with two other members of support staff for weekends for 12 or 13 years). So for example one secretary reported that she socialises mainly with five (named) other secretaries "for lunch and coffee". She goes out once a term with the named academic who is the head of unit and this will include postgraduates, but her "home social life is separate - except for interest in babies". She does have pictures of her two children at different ages in the office which is shared with other secretaries.

We shall be exploring the nature and extent of these work/social relationships in a future paper. Here we include a brief descriptive account of two social groups - the Birthday Club and the Tuesday Group one limited to secretaries and one administrator, the other comprising administrators, academics and a few postgraduate students.

Birthday Club

The Birthday Club has eight female members, three members in adjacent offices and five others who at various stages in their careers in the university have worked together.

"We have a collection for the birthday person and have a get-together in the lunch hour.

Another member, now academic related, commented on the all female nature of the birthday Club. "A group of men wouldn't arrange a Birthday Club. Women are more tuned in to family groups and they talk about family". She tends not to talk to her academic group about families but she talks to the office women about her family. That's what bonds them together, because "Family is more important than anything else you do, and we all know that".

The Birthday Club seems to combine elements of work sociability with a female family orientation.

Tuesday Group

The Tuesday Group has been meeting on a fairly regular basis at least in term time on Tuesday evenings for nearly two years. Its core is a group of three or four administrative (academic related) staff together with four of the academic staff and researchers who are from one faculty in the university. Several of the academic staff who attend have their home bases at some distance from the university and either stay overnight in university accommodation or take a late train home. They would probably do this anyway but the Tuesday Group provides a pleasant social interlude. All the administrative staff are female and most of the academic staff, apart from one or two, are male. The group is often expanded beyond the core to include one or two friends and colleagues from another university in the city. Outside the nucleus group quite a large number of senior and junior academic and academic related staff join and participate occasionally - in all over two years about forty people. People start to gather in ones and two's from about 5 p.m. at a Wine Bar, walking distance from the university

towards the city centre. Rounds of beer and bottles of wine are ordered and people sit at one large table along benches. By about 7 p.m. there may be as many as a dozen gathered. There then usually follows a discussion/argument about where those staying on are going to eat, predilections and aversions have to be catered for. Then usually a smaller group goes off to eat at one or two restaurants. The remainder return home or even go back to the university for more work. Sometimes people go on to a jazz club, ballet or theatre.

The Tuesday Group is seen as a pleasant and sociable occasion after a hard day's work. Although conversation and interests range widely there is the shared experience of the pains and pleasures of administration, teaching and research at the university. Thus, while talk may include sailing, theatre, food or music, there is also gossip, rumour and speculation about what is going on at the university. There is a deal of sorting out academic and administrative business but this is kept within fairly strict bounds and not allowed to dominate the evening.

Gender, family and work

All our respondents are female, some single, some married, some with children, some without, and of different ages between twenty five and fifty five.

We asked did being a woman make a difference to the social relationships surrounding the work and while we got some responses to this - usually that it was different - there was some difficulty in that actors playing the role of secretary in particular are so predominantly female that it is difficult to separate out the female and secretarial elements. As several people pointed out, it is difficult to know whether it would make a difference "as I am a woman and there are no men in the university occupying these positions".

Perhaps more important than perception of male and female differences in approach or attitude were references to family responsibilities, family roles may also be extended to students and academic staff - "with the students it is a bit of a mothering relationship". Another

administrator said that while she is sometimes asked by students to arranged events "she has other priorities with a young child" - most of her socialising is with the family. A departmental secretary said students would be less respectful to a man. They have an image of a woman as being more efficient. They expect to see a woman in that office.

Several of the secretaries commented on the one hand how the availability of maternity leave and part time working fitted with balancing the demands of family and work but on the other in the end the family came first. There was one set of interesting comments which contrasted the way secretaries and administrators handled the family and work commitments with that of academic staff.

"Something that is allowed to go on in the university, but which would never be tolerated elsewhere is the academics abuse of how they handle their time, particularly in relation to their families and their domestic arrangements. There is an assumption - whether they are male or female and it is often the male now - that women go back to work after families, something has to give sometime. It is now often support staff who are picking up that tab".

She gets "a lot of 'I can't do that because I have to meet so and so from school' or they have to look after children. Of course you should put your family first", but she can't say that she won't be there "on Wednesday afternoon because that is when she is spending time with her child". When she tries to set up a meeting she has trouble. She makes arrangements "but here people are being able to have careers and family at the expense of time which they should be putting in here". That really gets to her because she knows that she and "other support staff put their families first and also give full commitment to their jobs". She continued "It seems to be a university thing. It comes from a background where there have always been the long holidays. Those who say they are a new man have the luxury of being one" - by implication at the expense, or at least aggravation, of female support staff secretaries and administrators.

Several secretaries and administrators noted the different balance between family and work roles at three different stages in the family cycle: before children, with young children and with

children growing older and becoming less time demanding. One secretary who had become an administrator with work experience shaped by maternity leave, and with part-time working while children were young, was considering full time work and seeing work more as a career while for her colleagues of roughly the same age home commitments still took precedence. She feels "It is different for the younger mothers here. They just take their maternity leave and come back to work. They are coming from a different generation where work is more important".

Conclusions

Our study confirmed that university secretarial and administrative staff have been affected by changes in higher education practice, as much as their senior management and other academic colleagues. The support staff whom we interviewed seemed to have come to terms with increasing workloads and the reduction in the number of their colleagues. This meant that in most cases the days of the PA, working for one boss, were over. They found themselves having to juggle the duties involved in supporting multiple members of academic staff and a growing number of students, and they described the working methods they adopted to carry out this complex work. Additionally, we saw how they were having to adapt to the demands for managerial (particularly financial) accountability in the university sector. This manifested itself, for example, in the way that students (especially those paying their own fees) could no longer be regarded as "those students", but rather "our customers", whose ever-growing expectations of the service offered to them at the university must be met. And again, it showed itself in the extent to which the interviewees were involved in helping their academic colleagues meet the demands of teaching assessment audits, research assessment exercises, etc.

These changes appeared to have put a great deal of pressure on to the senior secretaries and administrators we interviewed. There were clear signs of stress amongst them, manifesting itself particularly in their frustrations at the lack of channels of communication within the university, the waste (even abuse) of time by other staff groups and the amount of time spent chivvying and chasing. But, at the same time there is much evidence of the adaptive nature of the secretaries and administrators and the methods which they employ to continue doing their work effectively. Relying on the skills provided via their formal qualifications, combined with the commonsense and experience built up through their work experience, they demonstrate how flexible and resilient they are. They readily take on greater responsibility by exploiting informal channels of communication built up with and between other members of staff. Sometimes this means by-passing more formal university structures.

On the areas we have reported - qualifications, work, the remuneration package, social relationships and gender and family - there is a substantial set of interactions, some simple, some subtle and all set within the material and symbolic world of this university and universities in the UK in general. Thus, for example, the different utilities of vocational (secretarial and clerical) qualifications and academic degree in gaining access to specific grades of employment with substantial differences in pay, responsibility and status, will affect how the remuneration package is seen. Those on lower grades of pay may have to seek satisfaction in other areas in order to make the work more palatable. At the same time, for both secretaries and administrators, the work itself does have its own rewards and the relatively flexible employment conditions on maternity leave and part-time work are congruent with the employment needs of mothers with young children. This family orientation limits and structures the social relationships associated with work. The complete female dominance of the junior and middle administrative secretarial posts makes it difficult to separate out the

characteristics of the work and its social relations from the gender, character and self images and social relations of the female occupants of these roles and positions.

One could attempt to trace further interconnections, and we shall attempt to do that in further papers. We shall also try to investigate in more depth the nature of relationships of secretaries and administrators to each other and of both to academics and students. One aspect it would seem worth pursuing is the nature of the division between secretaries and administrators, the degrees of blockage and mobility, as well as differences in the tasks and types of control (individual and group) exercised by these groups on each other and within the social world of the university. There is much more work to be done on the importance of gender and family situation in this sort of work situation, including the presentation of self in choice of clothing as well as the organisation of the office.

In terms of theory and method we have found the attempt to engage with the different perspectives of our interviewees fruitful. The degrees of congruence and difference from the official purposes and culture of the university and the academic world has, hopefully, not only raised our understanding of the concerns and work of secretaries and administrators, but also shed some new light on what academics and even universities might be about.

Methodologically working in a pair has provided a degree of discipline and support as well as fruitful discussion, disagreement and insight. But more important than that has been the interaction with our interviewees which has challenged some of our assumptions about the nature of the work and the status and significance associated with it. Much needs to be done with not only our existing interview material, but also in a more organised ethnographic mode, observing and reflecting on our subjects and our own work and social worlds. This should include not only interviews with secretaries and administrators in other universities, but also with those who left this one through non-renewal of contract, early retirement, redundancy or

because they found employment elsewhere more attractive. This, together with comparative work on secretaries and administrators, female and male in similar organisations, private and public, should expand the small beginning we have made in attempting to understand the work and social relations of secretaries and administrators in universities.

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SALARY SCALES (Operative from 1.4.1995)

NON-CLINICAL ACADEMIC STAFF

	Spinal Column Point No.	Previous Scale From 1.4.94	Current Scale From 1.4.95
LECTURER GRADE A	4	-	-
	5	14756	15154
	6	15566	15986
	7	16191	16628
	8	17007	17466
	9	17813	18294
	10	18486	18985
	11	19326	19848
LECTURER GRADE B	12	20133	20677
	13	20953	21519
	14	21786	22374
	15	22622	23233
	16	23498	24132
	17	24377	25035
	18	25735	26430
Discretionary Range	20	27018	27747
	21	27881	28634
	22	28756	29532
SENIOR LECTURER/ READER	20	27018	27747
	21	27881	28634
	22	28756	29532
	23	29646	30446
	24	30533	31357
Discretionary Range	25	31302	32147
	26	32094	32961
	27	33007	33898
PROFESSOR Minimum		31158	31999

NOTE: Pt 19 was deleted from 1.4.91.

PS/MF/BP
05/06/95

SALARY SCALES (Operative from 1.4.1995)

ADMINISTRATIVE LIBRARY & COMPUTER STAFF

	Spinal Column Point No.	Previous Scale From 1.4.94	Current Scale From 1.4.95
GRADE 1	1	-	-
	2	-	-
	3	-	-
	4	13941	14317
	5	14756	15154
	6	15566	15986
GRADE 2	7	16191	16628
	8	17007	17466
	9	17813	18294
	10	18486	18985
	11	19326	19848
	12	20133	20677
	13	20953	21519
Discretionary Range	14	21786	22374
	15	22622	23233
GRADE 3	14	21786	22374
	15	22622	23233
	16	23498	24132
	17	24377	25035
	18	25735	26430
	Local Discretionary Range	20	27018
21		27881	28634
GRADE 4	16	23498	24132
	17	24377	25035
	18	25735	26430
	20	27018	27747
	21	27881	28634
	Local Discretionary Range	22	28756
23		29646	30446
GRADE 5	20	27018	27747
	21	27881	28634
	22	28756	29532
	23	29646	30446
	24	30533	31357
	Discretionary Range	25	31302
26		32094	32961
27		33007	33898

NOTE: Pt 19 was deleted from 1.4.91.

PS/MF/BP
05/06/95

CLERICAL GRADES - SALARY SCALE EFFECTIVE FROM 1 JULY 1995

	Previous scale 1 July 1994	Revised scale 1 July 1995
	£	£
CLERICAL I	7005	7224
	7215	7439
	7430	7658
	7654	7887
	7883	8120
	8119	8361
CLERICAL II	8363	8610
	8614	8866
	8877	9135
	9145	9408
	9422	9691
	9703	9978
	9995	10276
	10292 *	10579 *
	10600 *	10893 *
CLERICAL III	9995	10276
	10292	10579
	10600	10893
	10919	11219
	11256	11563
	11581	11895
	11930 *	12251 *
	12287 *	12615 *
	12653 *	12989 *
CLERICAL IV	11581	11895
	11930	12251
	12287	12615
	12653	12989
	13032	13375
	13419	13770
	13820 *	14180 *
	14231 *	14599 *
	14654 *	15031 *
CLERICAL V	13419	13770
	13820	14180
	14231	14599
	14654	15031
	15089	15475
	15541	15936
	16005	16410
	16490 *	16905 *
	16989 *	17414 *
CLERICAL VI	16005	16410
	16490	16905
	16989	17414
	17501	17937
	18029	18475
	18570	19028
	19127 *	19596 *
	19701 *	20184 *

* DISCRETIONARY POINT

PS/PC

11 October 1995

Draft Questionnaire

Background

What did you do before you came to Aston?

Why did you come to Aston?

How did you get in to the job you are at the moment?

Go through your career history

What is your educational background?

What further training have you had?

What have you found most useful in your career in academic administration from your education/training?

Current Post

What is your job now? - give details of job description, job title and role

What do you like about your job?

What do you dislike about your job?

Who do you work for? - ie direct line manager and other superiors

Who works for you? - ie whose line manager are you and who else do you supervise?

Relationships and Work Context

Tell us about your working relationships with other staff and students in the following groups:

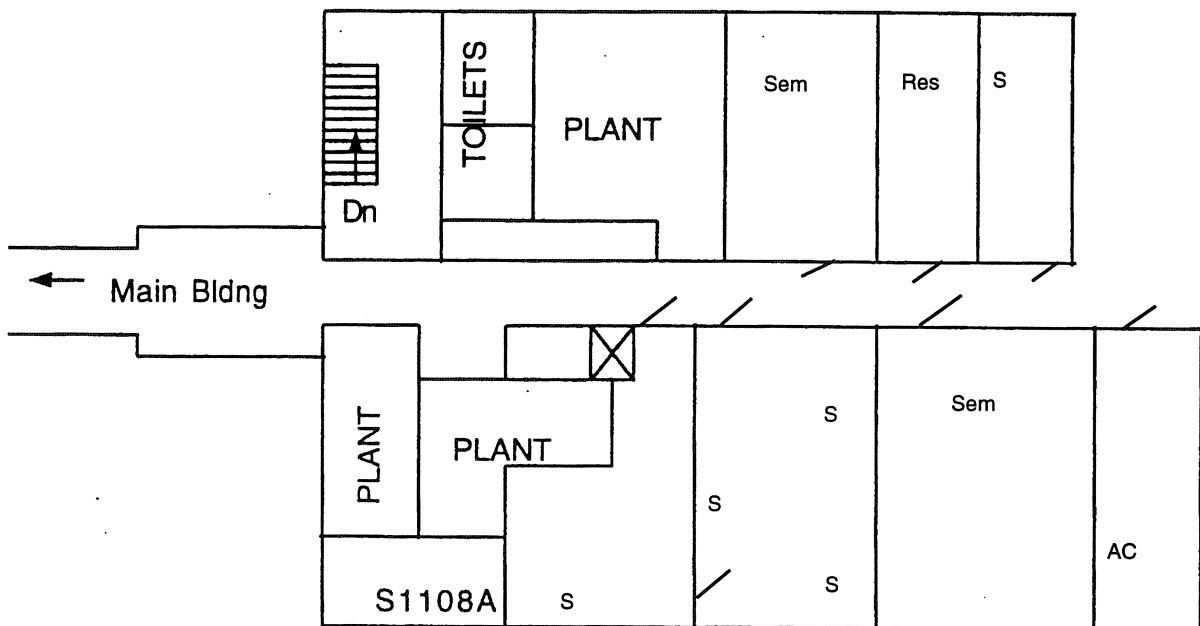
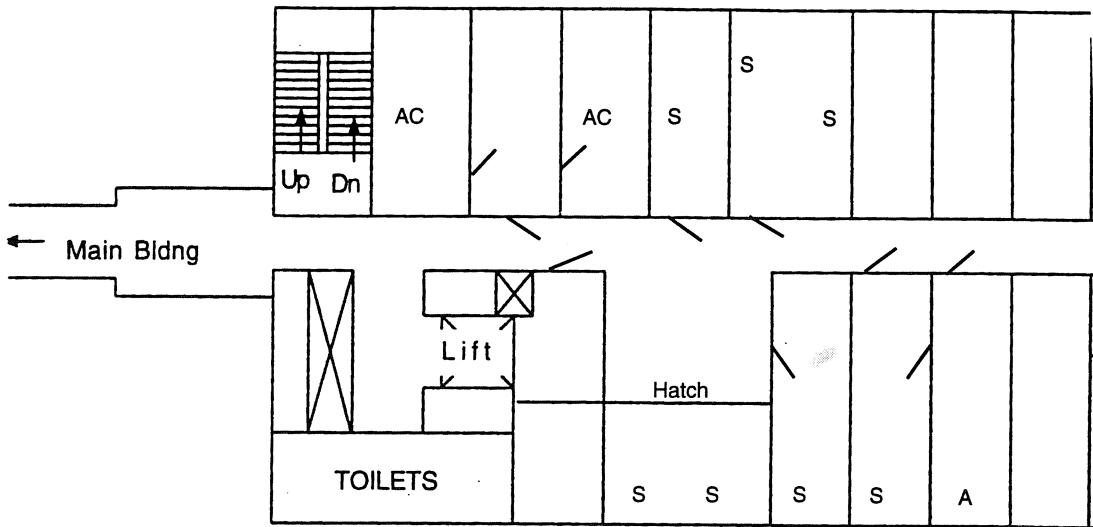
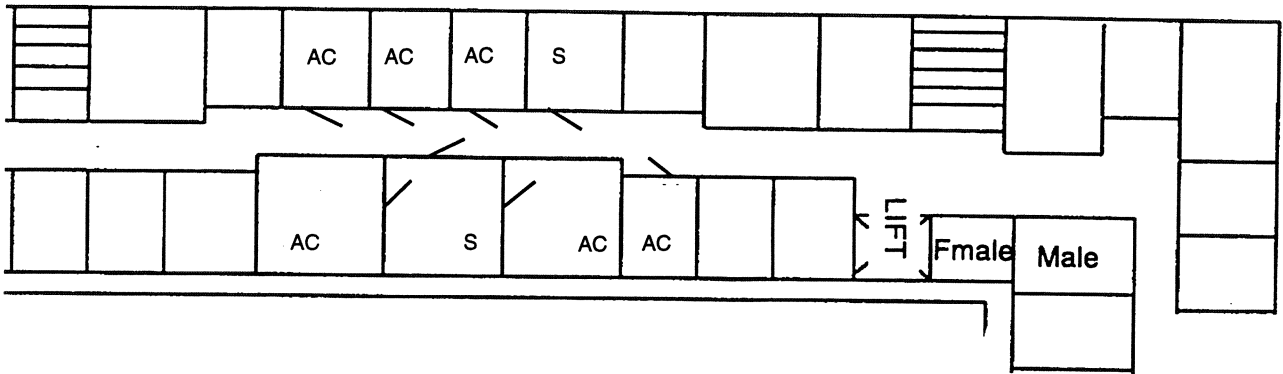
- * Secretarial
- * Administrative
- * Academics
- * Students

Does the fact that you are a woman affect these relationships?

Do you dress in a specific way for work? Why?

Do you consciously arrange your office in a specific way? Why?

23rd May 1996



KEY:
 S = Secretary A = Administrator AC = Academic Sem = Seminar Room Res = Research Students