



THE INDETERMINATE POSITION

Work relations amongst university administrators

IN-BETWEEN

David Regin Öborn



The indeterminate position in-between

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David Regin Öborn

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Working Life Science

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Till lilla V och stora V

Contents

List of original research papers	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Aims and contributions related to previous research	2
1.2 Clarifications and context.....	3
1.3 Relevance of the case related to previous research	5
1.4 Summary findings	7
2 Presentation of the case, papers and themes	9
2.1 The case - The administrators and their work	10
2.2 The papers	20
2.3 The themes and connections in the papers	43
3 Theoretical perspectives on relations in organisations	48
3.1 Gender, organisation and technology	50
3.2 Visibility, Recognition and Control	55
3.3 Work place dynamics and collectives	60
4 Previous research on administrators and NPM in academia	67
4.1 From secretaries to administrators.....	68
4.2 New public management and changed relations in academia	74
5 Methods	81
5.1 Research design	83
5.2 The process of data generation	87
5.3 Methods of data analysis	95
5.4 Strengths and limitations	97
5.5 The role of the researcher and reflexive approach	99
6 Findings and conclusions	104
6.1 Research questions and findings related to the papers	104
6.2 General findings and abstracted themes	108
6.3 Findings related to the context of NPM and gender.....	108
6.4 Strengths, limitations and future research	115
7 References	120

List of original research papers

1. Regin, D Ö., Axelsson, J., and Arvidson, M. (2020). Tidslojalitet. *Sociologisk forskning* 57(1), 25-42.
2. Regin, D Ö. (2023). Risks, possibilities, and social relations in the computerisation of Swedish university administration. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 38(3), 434-452.
3. Regin, D Ö. *Changing workplace relations and sites of belonging in Swedish University administration* (Manuscript returned to international journal after revision)
4. Regin, D Ö. *The Dual Nature of Visibility: Gender, Recognition, and Surveillance in Female-Dominated University Administration* (Not submitted)

Abstract

This workplace-based mixed methods case study at a Swedish university explores the changed roles and positions of departmental administrators due to changes in internal work processes and organisation, influenced by new public management doctrines and gender. It finds them to be in an indeterminate position in between different actors, expectations and organisational logics, which brings tensions as well as increased room for agency.

This compilation thesis consists of four research papers, deploying different conceptual lenses to explore the position of the departmental administrators and how they relate to other actors in the organisation. The individual papers highlight different aspects of the relations within organisations, contributing to different debates within work-life science and sociology of work. Paper 1 focuses on loyalties, paper 2 on the impact of new technology, paper 3 focuses on the role of belongings in an organisation and paper 4 discusses the effects of workplace visibility in terms of recognition and control.

While the four papers highlight different aspects of the departmental administrators' job and workplace relations, they provide a picture of an indeterminate position in-between different actors, expectations and logics. This position comes with both risks related to tension between management and professionals and the different expectations of what the job should be, and possibilities in terms of increased agency as individuals and as a group.

This case study is situated within broader trends in society, such as new public management, and the transformation of gendered occupations. While set within a university, the transformation of management doctrines and administrative work is also well known to be occurring in other sectors, such as healthcare, education, and law enforcement (Forssell and Westberg Ivarsson, 2014; Hall, 2012; Hasenfeld, 2009), making the findings in this study relevant to other settings.

Acknowledgments

It is a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you do not keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to. (J.R.R. Tolkien)

Writing this thesis has been an exciting and rewarding journey with its ups and downs, twists and turns, and now finally completed with this text. While at times a lonely endeavour, many people have been involved in this process, providing guidance and ensuring my feet remained on the track, to whom I wish to express my gratitude.

First of all, my supervisors. Lars Ivarsson, who has been committed and engaged throughout this process and always brought meaningful discussions, big and small, has helped me a lot, not least in clarifying for myself what I am doing or trying to say. Jonas Axelsson, whose curiosity, thoughtfulness, and remarkable ability to pinpoint the implication of seemingly small words and concepts has inspired me to “twist and turn” on theories and data, trying out different takes on what I took for granted. I also want to express my gratitude to Lena Lid Falkman, who acted as supervisor during a part of the process, for contributing insights and ideas, not least regarding the framing of the project and how to communicate that. And, of course, Robert Mackenzie. While joining the supervisory team a bit into the processes, his engagement and consideration of this project exceeded that. His openness to discussions, insightful and precise comments, and, not least, his generosity in giving both his time and experiences have been of utmost importance in developing this thesis and for me as a researcher. I am very grateful for that.

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1 Introduction

While studying my master's program at a Swedish university, I was also employed to do some teaching. As an aspiring student with an idea that perhaps someday I also could earn a place among the academics, I was quite keen to attend all kinds of seminars, meetings and general gatherings to show my interest (even though I spent most of the time sitting quiet in a corner, not making much of an impression). At one of these information meetings where some new administrative routines were presented, one of the senior academics had had enough. The person went off on a quite nasty rant about administration in general, the degradation of academia, and the stupidity of the organisation's administration and administrators in particular. In the middle of the rant, the academic stopped and looked straight at the departmental administrator who had been located at this discipline for years (and was the only person with an administrative position in this room full of academics), and stated "Not you Inga. You are one of us, you know how it is, you are not stupid. I am talking about the others." Then this academic continued, ranting, in fact, about Inga's line of work, the stupidity of the routines she was to uphold, the ignorance of Inga's administrative colleagues and so on. Eventually, the meeting went on and this episode, not unique, but perhaps more agitated than most rants on administration and administrators in academia, was left behind. But that sparked my curiosity – how does one experience and handle this seemingly strenuous position? What does this do to the performance of a job? Where do you feel at home as an included outsider?

As the author of this text has experience from different positions – as administrator, temporary teacher, assistant and now as a postgraduate researcher – the curiosity of this setting, as a potential case used to explore the changing roles and work-based social relationships resulting from reorganisations and restructuring of internal processes, has grown over time. The episode presented above has remained a source of curiosity that has now been turned into a project of exploration. While this is an anecdote of more personal value than of scientific significance, the questions it raises in terms of belongings, roles and the impact of social relationships are highly relevant. Hopefully this thesis will help provide answers to some of these issues and maybe inspire other explorations.

1.1 Aims and contributions related to previous research

This compilation thesis is based in a workplace-based case study set in a Swedish university, exploring the changed role and position of administrative support staff resulting from changes in the internal work processes and organisation of work and influenced by new public management doctrines and gender. The thesis aims to fill a gap in research by taking the point of departure from an often-overlooked occupational group – the departmental administrators - in the margin of the power centres of management and professionals - in this case the academics - from whose perspectives organisational dynamics tends to be described (see Smith, 2005).

While the initial, broad research agenda was formulated along the lines of “How is work in the organisation experienced from the perspective of the departmental administrators”, this agenda was narrowed down during the research process (further discussed in chapter 5), to focus on the changed relations to different occupational groups, influenced by the administrators’ position in the organisation and changes in internal work processes regarding administrative tasks. The aim is to explore how the organisational dynamics, in this case the relationships between groups, is experienced related to changes to the organisational structure and internal processes of work, from the perspective of the departmental administrators. As the project progressed in the different steps of data generation (see chapter 5), the focus was fixed on two research questions formulated as:

- How does the departmental administrators’ position in the organisation influence their relationships to other occupational groups in the organisation?
- Has the changed process of work regarding administration had any influence on the relationships to other occupational groups in the organisation, and if so, in which ways?

These two research questions are to a varying degree addressed in four papers that make up this thesis. Papers 1 and 3 put more emphasis on the administrators’ position in the organisation, and papers 2 and 4 focus more on the changes in work processes. The four research papers also deploy different conceptual lenses (further discussed in chapter 3) to capture different aspects of the administrators’ position and the changed work process. Paper 1 explores loyalties; paper 2 the social

mediation of technology; paper 3 develops an understanding of sites of belongings in organisations and paper 4 focuses on the effects of visibility, to explore the changed relations to different occupational groups from the perspective of departmental administrators. From these four papers, three themes are abstracted – tensions, agency, risk and possibilities – connected to the research questions of the departmental administrators' position and the changing processes of work regarding administration in the organisation.

1.2 Clarifications and context

To make some clarification regarding the research questions and terminology used in this kappa:

The position in the organisation here refers to the formal affiliations and hierarchies within the organisation, in terms of units where the departmental administrators are employed, located and who they formally answer to, as well as the informal associations and connections to other actors in the organisation (or, “sites of belonging”, as explored in paper 3).

The internal work process regarding administration here refers to the formal and informal understanding of the different actors' various roles and responsibilities in different processes as well as the division of labour and informal understanding what the departmental administrator's job should consist of (a theme further developed in all the papers.) The project explores foremost the social relationships, rather than focusing on the general social relations. This created some initial confusion in the data generation and analysis. As the data generation is done in Swedish, the term used in for example interviews and workshops has been “sociala relationer”. This term, translated to English, could mean both “social relations” and “social relationships”, where there is a risk of mix up. In this text, I am using the term social relationships in the meaning of individual relations. When the term social relations is used, it refers to more abstract structures and social positions rather than the direct interaction between individuals. These concepts are of course connected – the more general social relations influence the social relationships at the micro level, whereas the social relationships and social coordination at the micro level build up the social relations on a more abstract macro level (Smith, 2005).

The study is undertaken in an organisation influenced by the New Public Management doctrines (NPM) that since the 1990s have had an impact over the management of public organisation (further discussed in chapter 4). While we are arguably moving towards a state of “post-NPM” (Björk and Tengblad, 2023; Reiter and Klenk, 2019; SOU 2018:38), the emphasis of measurable outcomes and accountability by numbers (Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014; Hall, 2012; Hood, 1995) are important dimensions to recognise in the analysis of the dynamics in the organisation being explored, why the setting in this case is referred to as “influenced by NPM” rather than “post-NPM”.

This thesis is based on a case study, in terms of an intensive study of a single setting (Gerring, 2004; Hamel et al., 1993). In the data generation process, a sequential integration of mixed methods (Mason, 2002; Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016) in terms of interviews, a survey and workshops have been used, which is further discussed in chapter 5. The study is set in a mid-sized Swedish university (further details of the setting is provided in chapter 2), exploring the experience of work from the perspective of departmental administrators. In terms of the level of analysis, this study is arguably set on a mid-range level, focusing on one organisation with the ambition to find the general in the specific case (Merton, 1968). The idea of exploring the social interaction at workplace level and the everyday experience is inspired by classical workplace studies such as Burawoy (1982), Cockburn (1985), Kanter (1993), Lysgaard (2001) and Lindgren (1985) (see chapter 3). In terms of research design (further discussed in chapter 5), the study is inspired by arguments made within the extended case methodology (Burawoy, 2009) and institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987; 2005) to start with everyday experiences of work, trace the contours of external forces beyond the specific case, and connect the small events to the grand narratives (Lindgren, 1999). In this setting, that could be to see the impact new public management doctrines (see chapter 4) have on the organisational structure within the organisation (the field), in terms of how jobs are structured in order to be measurable or seen as efficient, or how external debates on gendered occupations (see chapter 3 and 4) influenced the organisation of work in the organisation.

1.3 Relevance of the case related to previous research

While the influence of new public management in the Swedish public sector has been a topic for research (Bejerot et al., 2015; Björk et al., 2011; Bruhn, 2015; Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014; Hall, 2012; Hall, 2014; SOU 2018:38), also in the setting of academia (Allvin and Movitz, 2011; Friberg, 2015; Keisu et al., 2015), this research has mainly focused on the relationship between management and professions (Bejerot et al., 2015; Ese, 2019), not least regarding the increasing administrative workload for the professions (Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014), and the growth of new types of administrative positions and services (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020; Alamaa et al., 2024; Karlsson and Ryttberg, 2016). When administrative staff have been the focus of research, the focus has been on the more specialised administrative services of the kind that Löfgren et al. (2022) mention as organisational professionals; that is, professional administrative services that is supportive to the managerial levels, located in the techno structure rather than within the support staff, to borrow the language from Mintzberg (1980). Within the context of academia, studies of these types of administrative services have been conducted on specific functions such as research administrators (Collinson, 2006), and the professionalisation of specific types of administrative functions (Karlsson and Ryttberg, 2016; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2019; Whitchurch, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008), such as internationalisation specialists and research coordinators, leaving the everyday support functions quite unnoticed.

Additionally, academia as a workplace has been thoroughly investigated from a gender perspective (see chapter 3 and 4), not least regarding the gendered implications of NPM. Some positions, such as the one of female academics, are well explored (by for example Bourabain, 2021; Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim, 2022), providing insights on how structural arrangements reinforce gender patterns in different contexts, not least regarding the allocation and organisation of work (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021; Thun, 2020). Gendered division of labour and the distribution of “institutional house-keeping” (Bird et al., 2004; Kalm, 2019) has been explored in different contexts (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021; Thun, 2020), taking different organisational positions and aspects into consideration (Ivancheva et al., 2019; O’Keefe and Courtois, 2019).

However, the gender aspect of academia is almost exclusively explored from the view of academics (or students (Van Den Brink and Stobbe, 2009)). While all these are important studies, there are still gaps to be filled as a complex organisation like a university is not made up by one single uniform category of employees. There are, on the contrary, a number of different professions and occupational groups, each with their own internal values, rules and tasks to be performed, where changes that could be seen as positive in one domain may cause problems in another (Kilhammar, 2011: 103).

So, while previous research regarding the influence of NPM in public organisations, the gendered aspects of academia and the growth of organisational professionals, has provided great insights and knowledge, there is a gap in research, a blank spot, as the types of vaguely defined administrative services closer to the professions that are focused in this study mainly have remained unnoticed (even though secretarial occupations historically have attracted some attention, see chapter 4). This thesis aims to fill that gap.

The focus of this thesis is the group of administrative services historically rooted in the secretarial services (see chapters 2 and 4 for discussions regarding the linkage between traditional secretarial work and the department administrators in this study). The secretarial role has been described as being an anomaly that is soon to disappear (Kurowska, 1996), a remaining paradoxically informal part of modern rational organisations (Kanter, 1993). However, Pringle (1988), argues that such a view blurs the gendered dimension of bureaucracy, overstating the existence of coherent aims and goals for an organisation, and (influenced by Silverman (1970)) rather stresses the importance of personal interests, relations and emotions in a formal organisation, where a range of power relations and logics comes in to play. Rather than seeing this peculiar role of secretaries as an exception or a “pre-bureaucratic relic” (Pringle, 1988: 87), the work performed in terms of under-conceptualised and ignored everyday activities, should rather be seen as an important part in what makes, on the surface, rational formal bureaucracy work, rather than fall apart.

Therefore, rather than exploring why these types of administrative service occupations still remain, or investigate their potential to achieve occupational closure (Davies, 1996; Witz, 1990), similar to the more specialised administrative occupations that previously has been the

topic for investigation (Alamaa et al., 2024; Boglind et al., 2011; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017), this thesis aims to investigate their current role and relations to gain deeper insights into the organisational dynamics, providing further knowledge on how our organisations work.

From that perspective, the departmental administrator focus in this thesis constitutes an interesting case, as different positions in the social structures provides different insights (Smith, 2005). By exploring an organisation, in this case a university, from the point of view of support staff, in this case the departmental administrators, we might add new aspects compared to when the relationships between occupational groups in professional organisations are explored from the position of professions or management.

1.4 Summary findings

As mentioned earlier, the research questions guiding this thesis are explored in four independent research papers addressing different aspects and debates central to the aim of the project. Paper 1 discusses how a multiplicity of loyalties towards different groups in an organisation creates tensions as well possibilities. Paper 2 discusses risk and possibilities connected to the introduction of new technologies, related to internal work processes regarding administration. Paper 3 addresses debates of work collectives and work-based identities, exploring the collective agency of the departmental administrators as an emerging group in themselves. Paper 4 discusses different types of visibility and the impact of whom one is visible to in an organisation.

These four papers provide part of the answers to the research questions by giving more specific answers as to how roles and relationships have been influenced by consideration of loyalties, the introduction of new technology, multiple sites of belonging in the organisation and the aspect of visibility in the work place.

A summary finding from the different papers, addressing the research questions, is that the departmental administrator's role and function in the organisation and the changes made to internal work processes puts them in an indeterminate position in between different actors and logics. There are three themes running through the papers, connected to, or resulting from, this position in between. These themes are 1) the tensions between academics, management. and administrators in the

everyday activities in the organisation, 2) the agency of the department administrators and 3) the risk and possibilities connected to the administrator's changed role.

On a more abstract level, the administrator's position in between different actors and logics could be analysed as part of a process of disrupted and restructured power structures where the traditional profession – the academics – are challenged by managerial principles influenced by new public management, combined with a process of transformation of traditionally female-dominated service occupations taking place in society. This transformation of administrative service occupations could be seen as disrupting some of the divisions of labour between traditionally male- or female-dominated occupations, such as professions and support staff respectively. This is further discussed in chapter 2 and more so in chapter 6.

The thesis contributes with insights regarding the transformation of a gendered occupation in a field heavy on traditions, and how the complex navigation between parties in a contested area - where tensions between management and professions puts the administrators in the middle - creates risk and opportunities, in terms of tensions and agency to actors often considered being tied to either management or the professions. This project adds knowledge regarding the influence of social relationships in the organisation of work and the changed relations between different occupational groups in an organisation, with the background of change as influenced by new public management doctrines.

After this introduction, in chapter 2, there follows a more detailed presentation about the context and the case of this study in terms of the administrators and their work, followed by a presentation of the four research papers that constitute this thesis. Thereafter, the summary findings from the papers, and how they link throughout this project, is discussed. This is followed by chapters 3 and 4 that rehearse the theoretical frameworks and debates that have influenced this project. Whereas chapter 3 discusses the theories and debates used as analytical lenses in the different papers, and to some extent the thesis in general, chapter 4 presents previous research regarding what might be considered the historical and theoretical context in which this study is located. In chapter 5, the research design and methods of this study are discussed, connected to epistemological issues. Thereafter follows the

final chapter where the conclusions are drawn and discussed, followed by some notes of the benefits and limitations of this study and potential avenues for further research connected to these conclusions.

2 Presentation of the case, papers and themes

There now follows a presentation of the case, the four research papers making up this thesis and the central themes abstracted from the papers. This chapter also presents more details regarding job content and the nature of the departmental administrators' jobs. While these descriptions of the departmental administrators' jobs are central to all of the four papers, not least in informing the analyses made in the papers, they are not being told as the main story. These descriptions are presented here, before the individual papers, to give the readers a proper introduction to the work and organisation of the departmental administrators that are the focus of this project. In that regard, these descriptions are an independent contribution made in the Kappa.

After that, there follows a presentation of the four independent research papers that makes up this thesis. While based in the same data from the same case study, the papers are addressing different aspects of the research questions by deploying different conceptual lenses. As individual papers they are making contributions to different debates, while at the same time building up to the general answer to the research questions.

A summary finding from the different papers is that the administrator role and function in the organisation and the changes made to internal work processes puts the administrators in an indeterminate position in between different actors and logics. That position could be analysed in terms of tensions, agency, risks and possibilities, which are the themes running through this thesis. These summary findings and abstracted themes, and how they connect the papers, are discussed after the presentation of the papers.

With a slight risk of running ahead of the discussions of the traditional role and development of this group of administrators (held in chapter 4), and despite the perhaps unusual step to present data at this point in the kappa, I want to introduce the reader to what the departmental administrators' job consists of and what they are doing within the

organisation, to provide some of the settings of this case study. While the exploration of job content and job characteristics are part of the findings and contributions of this thesis, these issues are not subject to an independent paper, but they provide the crucial background and context in all the papers. The descriptions and analyses in the papers that make up this thesis are, while covering different aspects, based in the everyday practices of work. The descriptions of the jobs are, in that regard, a contribution made in the Kappa, rather than in any of the papers. These findings are presented here to give the reader important insights in the job and the setting of the study, in order to give a frame of reference to the individual papers that are presented after that, adding to the transparency of the analysis and findings presented further on. Therefore, while the presentation of data at this point may be a bit of unorthodox move to make, I think it is a good one.

2.1 The case - The administrators and their work

Who are the administrators in this study?

The title *departmental administrators*, used as a label for the group in this study, is a made-up title, as these roles are given slightly different titles within Swedish universities today. Until about 20 years ago, they were called secretaries, with different prefixes such as departmental secretary, project secretary or course secretary. More recently, they have been called administrators (with different prefixes), such as course administrator, research administrator, student administrator and, as in this case, departmental administrator, as part of the process of changing the function and job content. In this thesis they are called departmental administrators, but for the sake of the historical context, it is relevant to note that this group, traditionally named secretaries, share the history of the secretarial occupation. The development and background of this group is further elaborated upon in chapter 4.

What do they do?

As a general support staff, the nature of their job is vague and hard to catch (further discussed in chapter 4.1.). The formal job descriptions provided by the organisation could be summarised as to “provide efficient support of high quality”. Further details are possible to conclude from some of the descriptions and flow charts of internal work

processes. These charts are, however, often developed at workplace level in the various departments, and therefore differ quite a bit from one another. They also seem to be quite often ignored in the everyday practices. When asked in the survey to what extent they (the departmental administrators) experienced that they were asked to perform tasks that were outside of their formal job, a majority replied that they often, or very often, experienced that. At the same time, a frequent comment to that particular question in the survey was that “I think it is often, but it is hard to say as I don’t really have any job description”. So there seemed to be an idea of what the job should consist of, but a quite vague or informal idea. In the follow-up interviews, the same theme emerged: job descriptions are vaguely formulated, and the work is largely shaped by incoming questions and expectations.

It's hard to say because we don't really know what our tasks really are. It's not formalised, like you're supposed to do this and that. But if you get a question or a task, you solve it, that's how we work. It's really weird, isn't it, it sounds really weird when I say it, haha (Kim)

However, even though many of the participants state in the survey used in this project that they do not have any formal tasks or job descriptions, 76 percent say that they know what is expected of them in terms of work. The contradicting picture, that the departmental administrators both know and do not know what is included in their job, is perhaps nuanced a little if we look at a couple of other questions from the survey. Asked about the possibilities to demarcate or defined their job content, 64 percent answer that they can at least to a fairly high degree clearly define what is included in their job, while 36 percent feel able to do so to low or no degree. When asked if their job descriptions clearly regulate what is included in their job, 42 percent answer no, while more of them, 44 percent, state the alternative "in general but not in detail". When asked if they have clear guidelines from their manager about what is and is not included in their work, the answers are 9 percent yes, 35 percent no and 54 percent "in general but not in detail". As a reflection of these answers, 58 percent of respondents to the question "It is up to me to decide what is and is not included in my work" state that this is the case for "the details but not the general content".

In one way, what the job consists of is quite clear – the job content is largely determined by what "comes in" in the form of requests and expectations, as 67 percent state that their work mainly consists of

handling ongoing inquiries from various directions. At the same time, what those requests are about and to what extent they are within the limits of the departmental administrators' role to handle, varies a lot. A recurring theme is that there are no typical working days; one of the interviewed administrators, Frida, says that "after twenty years here, I'm still like new at work". On the other hand, the situation of "there are no general days" seems to be just that general day at work. An illustrative answer of what a day might look like is provided by one of the participants, Elisabeth, saying that:

I'm sitting there with exams, then a colleague comes in and says 'I've had a student who has asked about this' and then you start helping them. Then the guy that I reported the copy machine to comes to fix what was wrong, and then a student comes and asks something. And then the phone rings and then I get a lot of emails, and 'have you read my email I need help now' and 'how do we arrange this' and things like that. And then I might realise that I have to go into [the learning platform] and put in a message for this with some assignment or an exam or info, and then the next teacher comes along and 'hey my distance program, we have to schedule a meeting'.

Another aspect that can explain the seemingly contradictory experiences of both knowing and not knowing what is included in the job is added by this free-text comment from the survey, suggesting that certain parts could be figured out, while others are more unclear:

I know what is expected of me by understanding the process around the students and the courses. But the rare or deviating tasks that 'end up' on me or belong to the subject, I'm not sure if my boss even knows about.

While some, on one hand, point out that the job is undefined, perhaps even limitless in its potential amount as each completed task opens up the possibility of taking care of more requests and increasing demand (as discussed further in foremost paper 3), others point to the fact that this is how it should be, stressing the benefits that come with it. Some say that it is nice to be able to shape the job in this way. Others believe that it is problematic to some extent, but that it must be so when working with people. But what this can mean is highly varied and in many situations a topic of negotiation in every day work between the administrator and the academics in the different departments. This can also be related to different ideas of what the administrators should do that seem to exist in the organisation. While some of the departmental administrators express a position closer to that of a specialist, others experience that "some people see me as their personal assistant and ask for things regardless of whether it is outside my actual duties or not."

There is a span here between what is formulated by management in formal documents regarding what needs to be done – via what is requested by academic colleagues in the different departments - to what is identified as important or interesting by the different departmental administrators. Besides the range from what you have to do, to what you want to do, there is also the dimension of what you are not supposed to do, but that you do anyway. This is related to the boundary problem mentioned earlier, the difficulty of knowing where the limit is for what is one's task. While often unclear, that limit can also be deliberately crossed when the departmental administrators perform tasks that they know should not be performed by them, but which they do anyway for various reasons. It can be such things as handling other people's invoices, planning which courses should be given or reporting documentation in systems. The impact of these kinds of expectations are discussed further in papers 1 and 3.

Why then are they doing things they know they should not? There seems to be a variety of reasons such as: ideas of efficiency - "Actually, they're supposed to do it themselves, but it is faster if I do it"; concerns for the organisation - " I know it is not my job and that I am not supposed to do it, but otherwise no one else is doing it"; and a pride in one's abilities - "It is not my job, but I am the one who knows how to do it." It can also be a matter of more social considerations, that the tasks are carried out to maintain the good atmosphere in the group as a 'no' can provoke "sour faces". This is further explored in papers 1 and 3. Regardless of the reasons for doing tasks that one should not perform, it follows in a pattern of work that is perceived to be done out of sight of management, expressed in quotes such as: "I do a lot of things that my boss doesn't know about, but that are better that I do." This is further discussed in papers 2 and 4. Another such perceived invisible function is to be the backbone of the organisation; those who know how things are usually done and what the processes look like. While students come and go, and teachers and researchers move between projects and assignments, the departmental administrators are often the ones who provide the continuity. Nevertheless, they are often overlooked when it comes to mapping activities and they rarely appear in the organisation's formal documents (further discussed in paper 2). Although less visible in formal documentation, they are expected to be physically present and available to support individuals with practical tasks and to act as a socially cohesive element within various environments. The expectation that they are on standby sometimes appears to be a signal

function rather than a need to have an actual task performed, which is further explored in papers 1 and 4.

In summary, the job of the departmental administrators' is vaguely defined, disparate in terms of content and is largely shaped by expectations and own initiatives. This situation is foundational in the exploration and analysis made in the papers, underlining the themes of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities that are abstracted in the thesis. While their job is vaguely defined on a general level, the departmental administrators are performing a range of tasks that will now be presented in more detail to set further the scene.

Job content

Most administrators are involved in various types of tasks related to students and teaching, such as reporting grades, schedules and being the point of contact for the students. Some of them also take notes from staff meetings, are responsible for practical arrangements around meetings and conferences and perform a wide range of every day support at the office, such as helping with accounting, managing receipts or booking lecture halls. Within the organisation, they also tend to some kind of extended arm for management when implementing new routines, supporting new IT systems and maintaining the formal procedures. This position is further explored in all the papers.

The job also consists of acting as a guide, being the one who knows the organisation, routines and processes to provide first-line support. This covers a number of areas – from being the one who keeps track of new regulations, to directing student questions correctly, providing system support to teaching staff in connection with grade reporting and leading general questions further. There are examples here of requests that are perceived to fall outside the scope of their actual duties. This may involve questions from researchers about where they should park their cars, where there are any clean forks or questions from newly admitted students regarding details of their private accommodations. Some experience it as stressful and tiring to constantly be on their toes and have to deal with questions regarding big and small, others experience it as highly positive to be the "spider in the web", the one who knows how things work. A third point of view between the two extremes is that it is simply what the job is. Eva explains that:

We are a service facility, we provide service to students, teachers, the public. That's what we're here for, and it depends on what comes in and ends up on your desk

The job could also include tasks such as writing newsletters, updating websites and preparing the teaching platforms on behalf of the teachers. Here, "the systems" – a range of digital systems for planning, communication and reporting - come in to play. These various systems have become an ever-increasing part of the job and seem to be a source of much frustration and conflicts. The frustrations are to some extent a frustration over the shared number of systems and how they work (or not work), and also a frustration of being a target for the academic's irritation with the systems. This is further explored in paper 2 and 4.

Design of the job

The job is largely governed by requests and own initiatives that can be approved or limited by the manager. The differences seem relatively large in what is expected in different departments within the organisation. Many participants have a perception that they do things differently in their subject or in their environment, compared to how things are handled in other departments.

There is a variation in the experiences of what is seen as expected by them as departmental administrators, and in what way support is requested. 87 percent of respondents said that some people require more support than others (as seen above, "support" can mean a number of different things). A small proportion, 12 percent, believe that there is a difference between men and women in what support is requested and in what way it is requested. A larger proportion experiences a difference based on academic titles – 40 percent of the respondents in the survey state that there is a difference in what people with different titles ask for support with. The difference in what the support should consist of is partly (although not entirely) attributed to the fact that people with different titles work with different things and need different support. On the other hand, the survey also contains comments such:

Those with higher titles would like to have support with big and small. They see administrative support as akin to old-fashioned secretaries.

25 percent state that there is a difference in the way people with different titles ask for support. There is also a fairly large difference when comparing departmental administrators located within disciplines

closer to science and technology, where 42 percent state that there is a difference, with those in the humanities and social sciences, where only 12 percent experience it that way. One difference seems to be that the "dumping of tasks" mainly comes from people with higher titles:

The people who sometimes expect me to do their job are usually professors and lecturers. As a rule, lecturers and doctoral students ask for help to be able to carry out their duties themselves. (comment in the survey)

Expectations from the academics bring to the fore discussions about what is rational for the administrator to do and what may serve as a more symbolic function. Similar to the tensions between "traditional expectations" and "modernisation" described by Pringle (1988) regarding the development of secretarial work in Australia, there is in this case an ever-present awareness of the role or stereotype of what is described by one respondent as "the old kind of secretary who ran with the duster and made coffee", that seems to remain as some point of reference to relate or distance oneself from. A common theme is that many "have heard that it is a little more like that in other departments" and that it "was more like that in the past, but now no one is doing that". Even if it is not something they themselves have directly experienced, the idea that this notion may exist, or has historically existed, plays into how the participants in this study reason about their work, giving the historical role (further discussed in chapter 4) a remaining influence over the job today. This active relation to the traditional or historical expectations on the job is strengthening the impression of an indeterminate position in between different ideas and expectations.

As mentioned above, participants point out that there is a difference now compared to the "old kind of secretary". But at the same time, aspects of these more traditional expectations came up in some of the conversations – and not always as expectations from other groups such as academics or management, but from their administrative colleagues:

It feels like there's an expectation from other administrative colleagues that it's going to be nice in the kitchen and public hallway areas, but also teachers expect that there will be gingerbread cookies in the lunchroom before Christmas time, that the Christmas tree will be dressed. (Elisabeth)

Although there are rather low expectations of this type of work from the administrators, there is a consistent awareness that there could be such expectations based on the history of the occupation that also

remains within their occupational group (perhaps as part of a collective culture (Lindgren, 1985; Lindgren, 1999)). While these expectations did not materialise in my data in terms of formal demands, the existence of the potential expectation is something the respondents in this study actively relate to and reason about. The idea that someone might have that image or expectation affects how they view and relate to work, and how they reason about their colleagues' work:

I've understood that on some subjects it's very hierarchical and that it's almost going to be run after with feather dusters and stuff, sort of. That's not the case here, [...] there are no hierarchies built into the walls like there can be in other places. (Kim)

Expectations, boundaries and different perceptions of what the job should consist of are not just illustrative stories about women's dusters, but more business-related and tangible differences of opinion about the daily job. In the quote below, it is also made very clear how different expectations affect work, and how the job content seems to be open to a common discussion, where hierarchies still play a major role:

We have an older professor. He's really nice and I like him a lot but he can have this little old school bully background. He asks if I can sit in on meetings and write protocol. No one else thinks I need it, everyone writes their own notes, so I haven't been to many meetings. But it was kind of like that even though everyone else said 'you don't have to do it, you have a lot of other work to do', he was more that yes you should, and that your place is to write, we need a secretary. But it wasn't meant any offence or anything. (Ann)

These descriptions of the formal frame of the job content, the role in the organisation and the informal aspects that informs the job content, provide the direct frame in which the job is performed. To broaden the stage a bit (further discussion on this topic is held in chapter 4.2), there follows some additional data on the organisation and sector in which these departmental administrators work.

The organisation of work

All of the department level administrators in this study are employed by a centralised administrative department within one of this mid-sized Swedish university's faculties. They answer to their respective

administrative manager at faculty level, but their work places are located in different academic departments and disciplines. This model for organising administrative support functions is common among Swedish universities, although there are differences between universities. In this case, there are about 50 departmental administrators employed in each administrative unit sharing the same manager, who is at some distance from the departmental administrators, physically as well as regarding involvement of the everyday activities. The departmental administrators have their offices within various disciplines and or research centres within the university to provide administrative support to teachers, researchers and students in their respective departments. Although there is an increasing number of common meetings and joint projects among the department administrators, the major part of the job is conducted in relation to the teachers, researchers and students in the different disciplines. They are organised at the same organisational level and there is no formal rank or hierarchy among them; their connections to each other seem to be of a more informal network sort where one could, for example, turn to a known informal specialist within the group when help is needed.

The current organisational structure of the university reflects a set of restructurings where the departmental administrators went from being formally employed in the academic departments (where they are physically located), to being organised within a centralised administrative unit. The departmental administrators were partly centralised and serving each faculty, but also remained physically located amongst various disciplines – hence the label departmental administrators in this study. The reorganisation brought a shift where, at least initially, the staff in the central administration increased, while the numbers of administrators at local department level decreased. This formal separation of academics and administrators in terms of organisational affiliation is taken as the start of an ongoing process of separation regarding the organisation of work, that plays an important role in this thesis.

The setting of this study constitutes a favourable setting to explore the impact of changes in the organisational structure and organisation of work.

It is favourable as there have been clear changes made to the organisation of work and structure in such recent times that one could assume that there is an organisational memory of how it was before, and these changes have been made formally and documented, making them easier to identify. These changes have also been investigated within academia (eg. Ese, 2019), making the existence of such changes an established narrative to take as a point of departure. However, as these changes have mainly been explored from the perspective of academics and management, the experiences of this group could provide new insights. While the case in this study is located within a university, it is not, however, first and foremost a study about universities as such, or an in-depth study of departmental administrators. The departmental administrators are used as a case to explore the changed relationships within an organisation in the aftermath of reorganisations. As similar transformations regarding organisational and managerial logics have taken place elsewhere (Forssell and Westberg Ivarsson, 2014; Hall, 2012; Hasenfeld, 2009), the dynamics explored in this study could also be relevant to other settings, such as other professional organisations in or outside of the Swedish context. While we are arguably moving towards a state of “post-NPM” (Björk and Tengblad, 2023; Bryson et al., 2014; Reiter and Klenk, 2019; SOU 2018:38), the influence of this NPM (further discussed in chapter 4.2) is an important dimension to recognise in the analysis of the dynamics in the organisation explored here.

The sector of higher education has undergone, and undergoes, organisational changes (further discussed in chapter 4.2), not least in terms of administration, where the administrative workforce is sometimes perceived as being increasingly a resource at the side of management (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020), or are developing into new professions (Whitchurch, 2008). While some have been investigated regarding the new administrative positions within universities (eg Agevall and Olofsson, 2020; Collinson, 2006; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; Karlsson and Ryttberg, 2016a; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2019), such as the more specialised administrators connected to specific tasks and functions in the management systems, there is a large sub-group that rather than being part of the organisation’s strategic management, are located closer to the everyday activities of the academics. They could be argued to be part of the wider

occupational group of “administrative service workers” – a large and heavily female-dominated group, who are often overlooked in research (Karlsson, 2011). What we do know about them is that they are often dependent on personal relations to conduct their job and tend to become caught in the middle between management and professions (Evans, 1987; Haraldsson and Lilja, 2017).

While others, such as managers, HR-personnel and academics have also participated and informed this study, the departmental administrators are the centre of attention, and their experiences are guiding this study. An important background to the analyses in this thesis is the transformation of this administrative occupation, from the historical role of secretaries, towards something else, as the historical function of the occupation might influence the current understanding of expectations connected to their role. This development is further discussed in chapter 4, whereas now follows a presentation of the research papers using this setting as a background.

2.2 The papers

The four papers presented below are the main core of the thesis, providing the overall answers to the research questions presented in chapter 1. Papers 1 and 3 more directly engage with the first research question - How does the departmental administrators’ position in the organisation influence their relation to other occupational groups in the organisation? – and papers 2 and 4 emphasise the second question more: Has the changed process of work regarding administration had any influence on the relations with other occupational groups in the organisation, and if so, in what ways? While the papers deploy different conceptual lenses to explore these questions, there are three themes abstracted from the papers – tensions, agency, risk and possibilities - that build up to an overall finding that the administrators’ position in the organisation and the changes in work processes puts them in an indeterminate position in-between different actors, expectations and logics. In the section below, each paper is first presented in itself, followed by a discussion regarding the themes and links between the papers.

Paper 1 – Tidslojalitet

The first paper, Tidslojalitet, mainly connects to the administrators' position in the organisation (RQ1), and provides an initial step in developing the themes that connects the different papers in this thesis. The paper investigates how the experienced loyalty, or experiences of demanded loyalties from multiple groups, informs actions within the organisation by connecting the notion of time and loyalty. The findings in the paper regarding the experience of handling colliding loyalties show that the position in-between different actors and expectations provides tensions and risks of being torn and questioned. It also enables increased agency and possibilities to play out actors against one another to gain more room to manoeuvre. The paper is a result of a pilot study that has been important for the development of the further inquiries in this project, giving a first indication of what came to be the running themes, as well as a theoretical foundation for understanding the everyday experiences of the investigated group in order to connect that to more general aspects of organisations.

The conflicting loyalties in this paper are framed in terms of competing loyalties between being loyal to academics or management, partly a result from a changed organisational structure. Time and loyalty are connected to form the idea of time-loyalty, which refers to a loyalty shown and manifested using time as a resource that can be provided by the employee. It is an attempt to demonstrate how the sometimes-vague concept of loyalty could be understood as something highly visible, and puts forward conflicts of loyalties as an everyday experience.

The paper finds that there are connections between time priorities and perceived loyalties. Various relations, formal, informal and personal, influence priorities and time management where, for example, manifested presence and visibility are ways to display that time is available.

The paper contributes with analysis of how time management and prioritising time (in terms of work time put on different tasks) are influenced by loyalties and used to manifest loyalties. A more flexible organisation of work, where the connection between the performance of a specific task, and the time in terms of when to do it and how long to spend on it, makes the questions of time allocation, and with that the influence of loyalties, even more relevant.

Due to the “endless” character of the job - the more service that is given, the more is requested (compare Lipsky, 1980) - there is a need for the individual to navigate between colliding interests, demands and expectations. Regarding the departmental administrators, there has also been a decoupling of time and tasks, in terms of how many tasks should be included in a full-time position. As there is no easy way to measure the work load, there is a general insecurity in what is actually part of the job. This is an ongoing consideration and latent negotiation in the handling of incoming requests, that sometimes becomes more outspoken in relation to the administrative management when changes in the work time are discussed. An example of that is given by one of the departmental administrators, Kim, saying that

If you go down in working hours, for example if you have a child, from 100 percent to maybe 75 percent, the work tasks do not disappear for that, but you do your 100 percent (work tasks) in 75 percent (working time). It's pretty common. But when you then go up to 100 percent working time again, more tasks are added.

In terms of job content, as discussed previously in this chapter, there are some frames set in terms of job tasks and deadlines, but a lot of the job consists of dealing with, and prioritising among, incoming requests. These requests are subject to prioritisations in terms of what e-mail to respond to first; what issue to solve now; who can wait; which system to update and what to ignore. A lot of this is performed via e-mail.

A big part of my day at work is spent on reading emails, sorting emails, handling what is requested in emails, answering emails, short and long, participating in various email conversations and so on. (Elisabeth)

The findings in the paper suggest a duality with the emails. While enabling more flexibility in terms of when to address the incoming request, e-mails also enable an acceleration of how many conflicting requests one can receive. A physical meeting, as well as a phone call, takes equal time for those involved, and also gives a signal that the receiver is occupied to others that might come with additional requests. E-mail based requests of the performance of tasks circumvent that, in line with the acceleration and fragmentation of work time (Rosa, 2013). This creates an increased amount of potential time and loyalty conflicts.

While there is an ongoing need to make priorities regarding the allocation of time, there is also a constant need to motivate these priorities for the expecting parties. This is regarding both the performance of tasks and the manifestations of being available and on standby if someone needs any help or support. There is a perceived expectation that the departmental administrators are on site, sometimes a bit regardless of whether there is anyone else around or not. This demand of being available is not only something forced upon the administrators, but for some it is also a part of the understanding and identity of the role. While there is the potential to neglect a request or to not be available, that would risk the appreciated position of being the one everybody comes to, as one of the participants frames it, making them a lesser member of the perceived team.

The prioritisations come across as easy as long as one “has a good idea what the job really is about”. What the job actually is about is, as mentioned previously, a bit vague to grasp, indicating this idea of “what it really is” might be considered more of a tacit knowledge one gets socialised into by other administrators and co-workers. At the same time, regardless of having a clear idea of what the job really is or not, priorities need to be made and all expectations cannot be met at once. That means that someone needs to be neglected and let down. One way of doing this, and reducing the consequences for the person making the decision, is to create time conflicts that one seems to lack influence over; for example, schedule meetings at a certain time to avoid other meetings that one doesn’t want to attend, but would have a hard time to justify being absent from.

You have to find creative solutions for those things, haha (...) to legitimatise for your colleagues what you are doing, where you are, why you are not in the office, and things like that. You need to be a bit resourceful to make things work. (...) It is not that I am disloyal to someone but priorities must be made, and when you on purpose book colliding meetings, then you are displaying some kind of loyalty. (Lisa)

These considerations of loyalty, appearances and personal relationships seem to be an ongoing presence in the line of work, also influencing the content and performance of work in terms of allocation of time and priorities. The way time is requested and provided differs with context, relations and social positions. To be time-loyal in this setting is manifested via actions and presence, to be onsite and providing service,

in line with the various expectations that come from different actors in the organisation.

Empirically this paper contributes with insights regarding the work process and prioritising within this administrative function. The findings indicate that there are connections between time priorities and perceived loyalties. Various relations, formal, informal and personal, influence priorities and time management where, for example, manifested presence and visibility are one way to display that time is available.

In terms of theory and the overall project in this thesis, the paper contributes by exploring how the providing of time is a communicative method to establish and manifest loyalties, and how loyalties demand time to grow and be established. It opens up an avenue for further exploration in terms of how aspects as loyalty, belongings, digital technology and visible manifestations influence the performance and organisation of work.

A number of theoretical connections between time and loyalty are made in the paper. One such connection is in the development of loyalty relationships, where exposure over time is an important dimension. Another connection would be the role time and presence play as expected manifestations of loyalty – what is given time and space in the form of presence, temporal relief, availability and priority, is affected by loyalties and loyalty bonds. Depending on the input and understanding of the concept of loyalty, the emphasis on the connections between time and loyalty can be placed slightly differently. With a focus on loyalty as emotion and experience, greater emphasis is placed on the time aspect in the emergence of loyalty bonds. If instead the emphasis is placed on the manifest aspect of loyalty, such as actions and displays, the connection to time is placed more strongly on time priorities and demonstrated presence and participation. Time can thus be seen as part of the establishment (and dissolution) of loyalty bonds and in the maintenance and strengthening of them.

The notion of time also has a connection to the content of the job, where time is the unit that measures the job, but what that time should consist of in form of actions is fluid and an area of contestations. A large part of the working time involves managing time demands in different ways and prioritising different requests. An increased pace of requests creates more competing time demands, and thus also an increased

number of potential choice situations - loyalty conflicts. Part of the time loyalty in this case is to manifest one's availability and show that one has time and is in a standby mode; the time priorities thus acquire a symbolic character to manifest loyalty. The symbolic acts revolve around the display of potential temporal resources that can be mobilised, being in place and waiting and showing up in the right place at the right times. Time loyalty and loyalty conflicts linked to work are also affected by the person's own perception of who they want to be (Arvidson and Axelsson, 2017) and as a way of controlling the impression the individual makes in order to enable or create different belongings.

How time is demanded and provided is also context-bound and can look different depending on relationships, traditions and social positions (Oglensky, 2008; Zerubavel, 1987). Changes in communication routes, increasing speed and expectations of availability, increase the number of simultaneous loyalties and thereby also the number of potentially ongoing loyalty conflicts. It also reinforces the need to see the connection between time management and loyalty relationships and how they affect each other. One such connection is the deliberate creation of time clashes as a strategy to justify one's own opt-outs, as a way to mitigate the neglect of potential loyalty manifestations. Opting out of participation is then legitimised by the fact that there is not enough time for it - time thus becomes the problem, not the choice made by the person who is opting out. Besides making a contribution by developing these connections between time and loyalty, the paper also makes an initial case for the understanding of organisations as a web of multiple power centres, agents and relations, enabling the position "in-between" that are a central theme developed throughout this thesis.

Paper 2 - Risks, possibilities and social relations in the computerisation of Swedish university administration

The second paper foremost connects to research question 2 – the changed processes of work regarding administration - by focusing on the increased use of digital technology, its impact on job content and the understanding of what the job should be. It stresses the theme of risks and possibilities that comes with the introduction of new technology and altered work processes, demonstrating how the room for agency differs on a workplace level, and how the changed work process

increases tensions between “system” and “users”, with the administrators often caught in an indeterminate position in between as they often have a part in the implementation’s process, but not the decision-making process, regarding digital systems and work processes. The paper takes as a starting point a decision made by the Swedish government regarding the use of computers in the public administrations, and the following debate on how that was going to change the job content of secretaries and assistants. While that decision was taken some 30+ years ago, the division of labour regarding administrative tasks between academics and administrators sparked by the computerisation, is very much ongoing today. With the background of a narrative of hope among the secretaries for the computerisation to increase the skill and status of the occupation, this paper sets out to explore how new technology, in this case computers, changed the job.

The paper makes an empirical contribution in providing a deeper understanding of the importance of workplace relations in analysing the effect new technology can have in an organisation. It also makes a contribution to theory in analysing the unintended consequences of resistance towards management have on other groups, and also demonstrates how multiple aspects come in to play regarding the status and potential advancement of an occupation. As the risks and possibilities connected to computerisation are matters of social relations as much as being governed by technology, this paper addresses the debates on work and technology by exploring the social relationships at the workplace level, displaying how the positions of different actors within the organisation are connected. Resistance in one place by the academics occasionally creates hindrance in other places (for the departmental administrators in this case), increasing the lateral conflicts, and emphasising the position in-between.

The findings in the paper are presented as three aspects of how new technology changed the work processes in the job:

The *formal development of the role*, more directly connected to the new technology; the *increased discretion, changed relations and lateral conflicts* as indirect effects, and the *impact of local relations and traditions* has on the introduction of new technology.

In terms of formal demands and qualifications, there has been an upskilling of the occupation as there has been an increased requirement for higher education. This is generally considered as something

positive among the participants, as a way to increase the status of the group. At the same time, there is a sense that these higher requirements are not met with changed job content. Alex, one of the younger departmental administrators participating in this study, expresses it as

They tried to raise the status by hiring more competent staff, but the tasks are the same (...). They might need to follow it through, I think, with a bit more responsibility, a little more stimulating work or something.

As the job to a large extent is governed by requests from students and academics, their perception of what the departmental administrators should do has a great impact on the job. While some specialisation has occurred, a lot of the everyday administration remains the same. The introduction of ever new digital systems has brought what the administrators refers to as 'system fatigue' (systemtrötthet); a sense of exhaustion of having to adapt to a flow of ever new systems and new iterations of existing systems. As the design of systems determines central aspects of the workflow and deadlines in some processes, the departmental administrators' control over parts of the job are reduced, and some tasks becomes more fragmented. At the same time, there are also nuances to note as one gets to know what systems to prioritise, and which could be ignored.

A source of frustration is the design of the various systems, and the influence they have over the job. However, the design, function and usage of the system is nothing inherent in the systems in themselves, but a result of previously made decisions elsewhere within or outside of the organisation. The departmental administrators' physical and organisational position as being far away from the IT-specialists and managerial groups involved in developing and specifying the design and usage of various systems, has consequences for this.

Your boss is so far away, and you may not be understood by your boss, about these everyday problems that are still my everyday life. Once when my boss happened to walk by in my corridor, I said come in and have a look here in the system. I have 150 courses here; the number grows each time I open it and it is not possible to sort them. 'This is not how it should be', says my boss. Then absolutely nothing happens. (Alex)

The new technology seems to have fragmented parts of the job and reduced the administrators' control and influence over the conduct of work. At the same time, the computerisation seems to have altered the division of labour regarding some administrative tasks in the organisation. While some of the tasks have been automated, others have landed on the desk of academics and students. As an indirect effect of the new technology, the increased administrative work performed by academics and students (instead of by the departmental administrators) has reduced the workload for the administrators, creating opportunities for them to take on or develop other more skilled tasks. However, there seems to be a dissatisfaction among the academic staff with this development, as their administrative workload has increased. This creates a situation where the administrators and academics sometimes struggle to get tasks off their respective desks, and onto the desk of the others. This struggle or tension, where the academics resist taking on some of the tasks, sometimes creates a hindrance for the development towards more developed administrative services. It is not the technology in itself that hinders this development, but other actors' resistance towards changes in their role.

Furthermore, while it is not up to the administrators to make the decisions regarding the usage of various digital systems or the division of labour within the organisation, they are often the ones that bring the news to the academics, and are supposed to introduce the new systems. This makes them somewhat of a target for the resistance from the academics. One of the more senior administrators, Erika, describes that one of the biggest issues she and the other departmental administrators faces now is

trying to get the teachers to accept that it will be changes. (...) We, as administrators, we know that there are always new systems. Our role as administrators is such that we must know these systems, otherwise we cannot work. Teachers do not have the same opinion. (...) I can understand them in a way, but now it is decided that the teacher should be involved in these things. But they have a very hard time with that... It's enough that we just say something at a department meeting and they shout: 'I am not going to do that!'

This position, in the middle of the chain of information, adds to the sometimes tense relation between administrators and academics, as resistance towards managerial decisions in practice becomes directed towards the individual administrators, affecting their job. However, in

other parts of the organisation, in other academic departments, there seem to be fewer tensions, and the departmental administrators have increased opportunities to take on various tasks. The lack of formal job descriptions and the potential to expand the role is seen as something positive that brings additional value to the academics at the department, as well as to the individual administrator. So, the impact of the new technology is affected by workplace-based relations between administrators and academics, and the established traditions in the various departments. The opportunity to develop the role is, in that regard, arbitrary rather than systematic as “a lot depends on who you work with” as Ina describes the situation. She used to be involved in the development of individual study plans, together with the previous director of studies, to make sure no student fell behind. This was a task outside of her formal job, but a fun and meaningful aspect of it. However, when there was a new director of studies appointed, that went away. Ina says that “The current one and I click really well, but he wants to work by himself, so, yeah...” The findings in this paper also suggest that there are structural hindrances in the organisation regarding what job an administrator would be allowed to do, which sometimes does not really match the realities of work. This comes down to the phenomena mentioned earlier in this chapter; that the departmental administrators are often the ones who have been in one place for a long time and with that have gained a deep knowledge of the routines and practices, which often fails to be recognised. Where there is a new director of studies, for example, it is not uncommon that the administrators perform a lot of the groundwork and suggest the decisions regarding, for example, what student numbers to plan for, or the success rate of students in a program. They cannot, however, be formally responsible for those kinds of tasks, creating a situation where in practice the administrators take on additional, sometimes more qualified, tasks that they don't get recognised for.

In summary, the computerisation has brought risks as well as opportunities. The risks could be seen in terms of more fragmented tasks, a reduced control over some parts of the job and an altered division of labour that to some extent has increased the tensions between administrators and academics. At the same time, there is also the opportunity to develop new skills and take on other tasks as a result of automatisa- tion and the altered responsibilities for some of the administrative

tasks. However, these risks and opportunities to a large extent come down to the reactions and attitudes among the academics in the local department where the administrators perform their job. Sometimes, the opportunities and hindrance are connected to views of what is and should be a suitable task for an academic and for an administrator. However, sometimes the lack of opportunities or hindrance, in regards of developing the departmental administrators' roles and functions, are not directly connected to the administrators, but come as an unintended effect of resistance from academics towards management – if the academics refuse to perform some of the administrative tasks they are supposed to, these tasks then tend to fall back on the departmental administrators' desk instead, reducing the discretion and space for development and job crafting.

The paper argues that while one might see an advancement of the job indicated by the increased formal requirements and discretion in the departmental administrator's job, a more direct effect of the introduced technology is the current situation where administrators (and others) are being increasingly dominated by technology in the form of, for example, digital administrative systems. The increased access and use of technology are altering some aspects and expressions of the hierarchical and gendered relations by changing parts of the jobs and divisions of labour within the organisation. At the same time, these changes are not altering but rather reinforcing existing power relations. While there have been some reconfigurations in the local gender regimes and gendered aspects of the job (Acker, 1990) have been partially reconfigured (as new tasks connected to the new technology have occurred in the organisation and modifying established praxis), the gender relations are fundamentally unaltered as the new aspects of the administrative role are configured to play in to ideas of caretaking femininity (Blomqvist, 1999) and reactive support.

There is another gender dimension to the increased tension connected to the technology of self-administration, based on Hughes' (1996) suggestion that the increased self-administration seems to be gendered. The changes in division of administrative work in this study could be argued as displaying a change in gendered patterns in academia and different expectations on the job of the administrators, or it might be seen as part of the transition from a role and expectations connected to traditional male-dominated academic hierarchies and the female-

dominated traditional secretary jobs. There also seems to be a difference in experience between administrators located in male-dominated departments (such as science and technology), compared to administrations located in female dominated departments (social sciences and humanities). that indicates that the traditional notions are less intense where the gender pattern is weaker or less male-dominated.

The job is interpreted differently and contains different aspects on different sites in the organisation, where local gender regimes (Acker, 1990), and personal and organisational relationships (Hartmann et al., 1986) dictate the hindrance and opportunities to develop the job content. By taking these factors into account, the paper develops Hughes' (1996) and Reynolds' (2015) argument that the introduction of new technology might have unintended consequences and indirect effects, by adding that it is not just the introduction of technology, but also the different reactions of acceptance or resistance that causes effects for other groups in the organisation. This strengthens the notion of organisations as a web of multiple power centres, agents and relations that are informing jobs and influencing the experience and organisation of work, reinforcing the analyses of a position in-between that is a central theme developed in this project.

Paper 3 – Changing workplace relations and sites of belonging in Swedish university administration

The third paper foremost relates to research question 1– the question of the administrators' positions in the organisation – as it explores how changes in the organisational structure in terms of formal affiliations and the influence of informal associations, fosters belongings and how these belongings affect the experiences and understanding of work. A key finding, and contribution, in the papers is the notion of multiple sites of belonging within an organisation, that not only gives increased possibility to exercise agency, but also reinforces tensions, and the risk of being questioned and excluded from informal associations at workplace level. It is perhaps in this paper that the linkages between formal and informal positions in the organisation, and the themes of agency and tensions, are most strongly visible.

The paper uses the concept of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; May, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006) to operationalise different aspects of “home” in an

organisation, and draws on theories regarding loyalty (Alvesson, 2000; Connor, 2007; Fletcher, 1995; Guetzkow, 1955; Guillon and Cezanne, 2014; McKay, 2004); occupational identity (Jenkins, 2014; MacKenzie and Marks, 2019; McDonald et al., 2006; McLachlan et al., 2019; Orr, 2006; Salaman, 1971) and communities (Bechky, 2006; Jenkins, 2014; Korczynski, 2003; Lysgaard, 2001; Skorstad and Karlsson, 2020), to introduce and develop the concept “sites of belonging” as a way of analysing the social organisation of work at workplace level.

The paper seeks to demonstrate the influence of a multitude of co-existing formal and experienced sites of belonging and the emergence of additional belongings in an organisation. It does so by addressing the following questions - *Where do the departmental administrators see themselves belonging in the organisation? What is the foundation of these belongings? How do organisational practices inform belongings?*

The paper makes an empirical contribution by demonstrating how formal affiliations and informal associations create a multiplicity of belongings within organisations, which bring risks as well as opportunities. It makes a contribution to debates of workplace collectives by arguing that organisations could be understood as containing a multiplicity of belongings, and these belongings influence actions. The paper suggests the usage of “sites of belonging” as a way to capture that.

By using the term of belonging in an organisational setting – as sites of belonging – this paper uncovers two central features of belongings in organisations that are important to recognise.

1) There is a difference between formal sites of belonging and experienced sites of belonging. In this case, the *formal* site of belonging mirrors the organisational affiliation, the centralised administrative department where the individual is employed and belongs to in the formal organisation. The *experienced* site of belonging is the organisational setting the individual sees themselves as being a part of in their everyday activities; their subjective “home” in the organisation. In this case, that would initially be in the academic departments. However, these belongings are not static as the establishment and development of a formal site of belonging alter the perception and potentially the thresholds for membership at experienced sites of belonging.

2) The sites of belonging are not mutually exclusive. One individual could have multiple formal sites of belonging at the same time – being formally affiliated with a different part of the organisation - as well as multiple experienced sites of belonging – feeling a sense of home with multiple groups, that all influence actions and experiences of work. These multiple belongings come with strains as well as resources as they bring different expectations of which tasks should be performed, prioritised or avoided, so as to come across as loyal partners at various sites, while at the same time providing resources to balance demand and buffer excessive expectations on work or availability. The recognition of multiple sites of belonging, and the process behind their emergence, add insights into the dynamics of influence and quality of work within organisations. It also provides additional layers of the position “in-between” and the process of emerging sites and positions. The paper first focuses on the administrators’ somewhat informal, but historically formal, belonging (and organisational affiliation) with the academics in various departments. This membership is, however, challenged by a new formal belonging at a separate administrative department, and with that the administrators (perceived and real) changed position in the organisation. The findings in this section suggest that while the administrators are being organised in, and therefore formally belonging to, a centralised administrative department, they remain to some extent included in the academic departments where they are physically located. This is also where they seem to feel at home. Eva, who worked in the organisation even before the restructurings that changed the organisational affiliation of departmental administrators, expresses the experience of a changed organisational affiliation as

I have always preferred to see myself as a part of the discipline. I will not say that it has been difficult to come to terms with the outcome of the reorganisation, but... and I think this applies to quite a few of us, we belong to the [academic] department, psychologically and mentally – we belong to the [academic] department

However, as a consequence of their changed formal site of belonging to the administrative department, the administrators in this study experienced a sense of mistrust from the academics regarding their

involvement and position, in, for example, debated managerial decisions or new routines and processes of work.

One of the participants, Elisabeth, talks about a frequent misunderstanding in that she has any influence over the decisions made by management. This misunderstanding might be based on the fact that the departmental administrators often are the ones providing the information regarding new processes or routines to the academics. She states:

I sort of become an intermediary. Sometimes it feels like they [the academics] think it's me who's troublesome, who wants it in a certain way. (...) Then I have to show them that there is an administrative routine that the managers have decided.

The administrator's inclusion among the academics is arguably that of a peripheral partner, whose inclusion is dependent on which actions they perform to further the academic departments, rather than having a given position. This peripheral inclusion among the academics underlined the sense of need to meet the expectations of the academics in order to remain included, which created difficulties in drawing a line in terms of work load and job content. These difficulties were further reinforced by the vague job descriptions given by the organisation, creating a strenuous situation. A sense of loyalty plays in to that, as one of the departmental administrators, Vendela, puts it: "It can be hard to know, should I really do this, is it part of my job? It is not clear, but we are loyal. We are a loyal group of workers, we do a lot, as much as we can." This sense of loyalty is often directed towards the people in the academic departments – you don't want let down the people that are close to you, as Kim puts it. It is sometimes also based on a consideration of the organisation and the students, to make sure everything is as good as it could or should be.

In the second part of the findings in the paper, the relations to the administrative management are discussed, analysing how this additional belonging brings an additional set of expectations and demands, but at the same time also provides a potential buffer and the possibility to strategically play the different sides off against each other.

The departmental administrators were facing multiple, sometimes conflicting, expectations and demands. Besides the expectations from the academics, the administrators also faced the expectations and tasks

given by the managers in the administrative department. At the same time as the administrative manager made the formal decisions regarding the administrator's job content, the individual administrator could refer to these decisions as a way of rebalancing the demands and expectations from the academics. Ina describes a situation where she was asked by one of the academics in her department to take on extra work to cover up for a person on sick leave. This would have created a heavy workload for Ina, who still did not feel confident to just say no, as that could hurt the relations and her position in the academic department. Ina handled that by referring to her manager:

I said that I can't decide that, you have to go to the administrative manager and ask if I can help you. But I could not sit on two jobs, it is not possible! No, no, nothing came out of it. And then, in that situation, it was extremely helpful to have another manager that I could refer to!

The multiple belongings have enabled increased agency in the hands of the administrators, making it possible to play out the conflicting expectations from management and academics against one another, giving the administrators more influence over some parts of their job.

Adding to that, the changed formal affiliation has in some regards taken the administrators further away from the academics, but not necessarily closer to the management. In the third part of the findings, the paper explores the emergence of an additional site of belonging in the formation of a collective among the administrators, reinforcing their position as in-between actors rather than with academics or management.

The changed site of belonging within the organisation seems to have brought the departmental administrators closer to one another as a group in themselves. As a group, they were somewhat peripheral in relation to the academics as well as the management, where neither their manager nor the academics had the full overview of what the administrators' day-to-day jobs consist of; they tend to turn towards each other for reference and support. Vendela describes it as:

It can be tough for the administrators [to turn down the academics], if it is the case that you don't have the time and feel very hesitant in how to act. But then we administrators must try to be a sounding board and support each other as much as we can... it is lucky that we are our own college [Kollegium].

While the jobs of the departmental administrators are quite individualised and seldom performed in cooperation with other administrators, the administrators have created informal routines of coordination and job sharing, as a way to help each other out if the need occurs. This seems to have tied the group as a whole closer together. They have also developed their own understanding of their role related to management and the academics and other stakeholders, such as students and the general public, whose best interest they also consider as important. This sometimes creates conflicts and tensions with academics as well as management regarding, for example, how to perform the process of examination in compliance with the rules and regulations to make sure it is legally and ethically correct, and “fair towards the students” as Mia puts it. Another contested area is the time spent on the students, where the administrators and their managers are of different opinions. Ann talks about an ongoing conflict with her manager, who had told her that she “must not have so much contact with the students because it takes too much time.” “But”, Ann adds, “what if they have problems? We live for the students – if we have no students, then we have nothing.” These considerations of other stakeholders besides managements and academics, the function of their own group as a reference for supports and their own views of what to do and how to do it in the right way, could be seen as a part in the process of emergence of the departmental administrators as a group in themselves, with their own norms, collective identification and site of belonging. The final section of the paper develops some of the defining aspects that constitute the departmental administrators’ additional experienced site of belonging, emerging separate from academics and management. These defining aspects includes the function of their own group as *resource for reference and support*, their self-identified role as the ones *balancing the formal process and informal praxis*, and their consideration of *groups outside of academics and management* in upholding rules and ethics. These aspects underpin the emergence of this experienced site of belonging for departmental administrators, existing in parallel with the experienced and formal belongings with the academics and administrative management.

In terms of theory, the paper makes a contribution to debates of workplace collectives and belongings by introducing the concept of sites of belonging. While the separation between the formal and experienced

site of belonging in the organisation has brought tensions, it has also increased the discretion of the departmental administrators. The multiple belongings provide resources to play expectant parties against each other by referring to managerial decisions or local practices to balance their workload, without directly antagonising either side or being seen as failing to act loyally. The departmental administrators' different sites of belonging are occasionally used as way to buffer demands from academics and management by, for example, referring them to one another. The different sites of belonging therefore inspire and enable different sets of actions besides siding with either management or professions, which uncovers layers of dynamics to organisations that needs to be recognised.

Paper 4- The Dual Nature of Visibility: Gender, Recognition, and Surveillance in Female-Dominated University Administration

The fourth paper of the thesis addresses foremost the second research question – the changed processes of work regarding administrative processes, but also the question of the administrators' positions in the organisation (RQ1).

Building on the themes developed throughout the thesis, it is perhaps the paper that most directly engages with the contextual elements, the external forces in terms of NPM (see chapter 4) and gender (see chapters 3 and 4), in the direct setup and point of departure of the paper. It also locates aspects of the theme of tension as connected to broader tensions outside of the organisation, having a direct influence over the internal dynamics within the organisation, while also tying into more specific debates of workplace visibility, recognition and control.

In the paper, visibility is understood as being fully regarded and recognised by others, where your work is noticed, acknowledged and valued (Buchanan and Settles, 2019; Smith and Cheng-Cimine, 2023). The paper discusses visibility from the perspective of a female-dominated administrative service occupation (Karlsson, 2011) in the outskirts of the institutionalised power structures (Smith, 2005) in an academic organisation. It contributes to the debates on gender and visibility with an exploration of the impact to whom you are visible has in terms of recognition and control and additional data on the effects of visibility from

the perspective of a previously under research group, by addressing the questions of *To whom are the department administrators visible? In what ways are the department administrators visible? How does their visibility to different watchers affect recognition and control?*

As a strategy to make the female-dominated occupation more recognised, it has been suggested that their roles and tasks must be made more visible and clearly defined (Hoffman, 1989). At the same time, the visibility of tasks has been argued as giving the ground for increased managerial control, deskilling and fragmentation (Braverman, 1998). Rather than arguing that the group of departmental administrators is more or less visible, or that their visibility is something inherently positive or negative, the paper argues that the aspect of visibility must also be related to the question of “visible to whom?”, since this has different impact in terms of control and recognition.

Broadly speaking, the topic of being and becoming visible, related to strategies for recognition (Acker, 1990; Buchanan and Settles, 2019; Hoffman, 1989; Kanter, 1993) or threats of increased surveillance (Ball, 2002; Ball, 2010; Elliott and Long, 2016) and control (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Thompson, 2003; Thompson and Smith, 2009), is well debated within the fields of gender and sociology. We therefore know that it matters who the visible subject is in terms of the effects of visibility. At the same time, less attention has been given the effect of different ways of being visible and the aspects of to whom one is visible (Ball, 2010; Zuboff, 1988), even though this is noticed as an important aspect to explore. The gendered nature of the effects of visibility is also established, as visibility in the work place has different effects for men and women (Lewis and Simpson, 2012; Nash and Moore, 2024; Van Den Brink and Stobbe, 2009; Yoder, 1991), and the impact of visibility strikes differently between those of more and less power. While the gendered nature of academia has been thoroughly explored (by for example Bourabain, 2021; Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim, 2022; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023), it has been done so mainly from the position of academics. While that is an important focus, the exploration of other actors might add to our understanding of the norms governing the organisation (Smith, 2006).

The findings in the paper suggest that some of the individual direct visibility in terms of face-to-face individual interaction, in this case with

students, has been reduced and is missed. One participant, Erika, says that “it was more fun in the past when we had a lot of contact with the students. We have lost that now; I hardly see anyone these days”. While previously having daily interaction with students, an aspect of the job that brought appreciation and recognition and a sense of continuity as they follow the students through their courses, these interactions are now diminishingly small and consist mainly of the insertion of information into digital systems.

Many of the individual interactions have now been relocated to various digital platforms and shared systems (as partly discussed in paper 2). Tasks that previously were handled directly between individuals, either in face-to-face interaction or via telephone or email, are now located to shared platforms where the users don't have to interact with each other. Frida describes it as – “now things are more developed in systems, so that both teachers and administrators, and especially students can find it (...) So it is more directly controlled in systems”.

As more of the job is performed in digital systems rather than in direct dialogue between people, the work the departmental administrators are doing are becoming less visible to the academics in their close surroundings, adding tensions in their relationships. Besides the impact the increased use of digital systems has had on the direct visibility of the work of the administrators, the more fragmented working conditions for the academics also plays a role. While the departmental administrators are required to be physically present at the work place, the “projectivisation” and individualisation of the academic roles has reduced the presence of academics in the corridor of the university (this was even before Covid-19 struck). So, while the administrators in that regard remain highly visible in the work place, there are fewer people there to see them. Elisabeth says that

They expect you to be there from 8 to 17 in principle (...) while it feels like the teachers have no requirements at all to be there. Sometimes, the corridors are empty, and you feel a little lonely as an administrator.

While the increased use of digital systems for support, information and communication has made the administrators less visible on an individual, personal level, it has made their work more visible on an organisational level, providing additional recognition and possibilities to exercise agency. This has made them visible to other watchers as their work

in the processes and systems becomes visible to others involved in the same systems. While this visibility in the systems makes their work less likely to be overlooked in the organisation, it has made the outcome of their work less visible for the individual administrator. Mia says that it is hard to know who is watching or seeing what they are doing “like, if I type in this number, or this text here [in a system], where does it show up?”. In that sense, the mutual recognition in an equal interaction has, in that regard, been replaced with the anonymous controlling gaze of surveillance.

Besides being more visible as individuals in various systems, the departmental administrators are also becoming increasingly visible to one another as a shared group, and as a unit at an organisational level (a development also explored in paper 3). Kristina talks about how their position within the organisation has been improved with the re-organisation. Now, she says

you become visible in a completely different way, and above all, it is nice because you have meeting with the administrative department, and it becomes much easier to talk about things that concerns you more closely.

At the same time, while being more visible and recognised as a collective at an organisational level, they are in some regard becoming less visible as individual actors in their local departments as they are sometimes seen as representatives of the administrative structure rather than individual members, as part of the local academic department. Likewise, their visibility for the students is increasingly as an anonymous representative of the university in various learning platforms and other digital support systems.

These different types of visibilities, and the different watchers they are visible to, have an influence on the job in terms of recognition and control, providing different risk and possibilities. There is a sense of urgency to make oneself visible to the right actors in the organisation that comes across in the interviews, to reduce the risk of being overlooked. This is connected to the speculations about what the increased usage of digital systems will entail for the administrative occupations in general, if they are going to be reduced in number or remain the same. While Ina has an optimistic take, that even though “there are many who said that the administrators will disappear because our work would be outsourced to the teachers”, she does not share that view. As the administrators have been given new tasks to perform, some of the things they

used to do have been taken over by the academics, such as putting grades into systems. The administrators are rather involved earlier in the processes, which sometimes is not recognised. This has created some tensions where the administrators are facing questions from the academics regarding what they actually are doing all day, which in turn creates increased frustrations and fears of having one's job overlooked and the risk of not being recognised.

At the same time, while being less visible to students and academics, the existence of others to be visible for, and other ways of being visible, means that there are additional ways of gaining recognition, increasing the agency of the administrators. It is now possible for the individual administrators to become visible in different ways by their own discretion, to be part of internal work groups, developing a reputation as an expert in various systems, or taking on development projects related to administrative routines. As they are becoming more visible to one another in terms of internal meetings and shared documents and work processes, they are subject to more normative control from their own peers, as well as potential surveillance of an invisible watcher who might or might not recognise their activities in the various digital systems. This dynamic connects to the tensions between different actors, in terms of to whom one makes oneself visible, underlining the departmental administrators' position in-between different actors and power centres that is developed in this thesis (and in more detail in paper 3).

Some of the changes in the role might be understood as being propelled by the technological development and the agency of actors within the occupation. Another aspect of this is the ambition to increase the status and position of these kinds of female-dominated administrative support functions (as discussed in paper 2), in combination with the changing gender pattern within academia. The shift towards institutionalisation of the informal might also be considered connected to the influence of new public management in academia (Leišytė, 2016; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019), where visibility in managerial systems becomes increasingly important. The opportunity to gain recognition by being visible in systems enables a move towards a more masculine-coded role as regards productivity (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Thomas and Davies, 2002), moving away from the traditional role of more direct informal support at the work place level, as a way of distancing the

occupation from the invisible tasks (Fraser, 2016). While the jobs are reconfirmed as female-gendered tasks (Ainsworth and Pekarek, 2022; West and Zimmerman, 1987) in the organisation, the status of the tasks might have increased since they are becoming more visible and recognised as important enough to be institutionalised.

The institutionalisation of some of the support functions could be argued reflects a shift from a (feminine) focus on the role of support towards a (masculine) focus on the production of support (Karlsson, 2011; Thomas and Davies, 2002). The increased focus on output and measurability arguably brought by an adaptation to the dominant discourse of NPM does affect the professionals (De Coster and Zanoni, 2019; Keisu et al., 2015; Leišytė, 2016; Nash and Moore, 2024; O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019) - academics in this case - but it has also an (less explored) impact on the support functions as well. The changed position of the administrators is not just an effect of their agency and orientation concerning job content and aspiration, but also a reorientation to adapt to the new power structures in the organisation, where the academics are not the only, or perhaps not always the most important, group to be visible to.

The paper makes a contribution to debates of the effects of visibility within work organisations and the influence external forces have on a micro level in organisations by demonstrating how viewers besides management also are important to recognise, as these different audiences and ways of being visible have different effects on the job. These findings, while not expressed in that way in the paper, underline the departmental administrators' indeterminate position in-between different actors and the effects of this position in terms of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities.

Although presented as individual papers above, connecting to different debates related to questions of positions in organisations (RQ1) and the internal work processes (RQ2), there are common themes running through the papers. Altogether, the papers provide a picture of the departmental administrators' indetermined position within the organisation, located in-between different actors (mainly management and academics), logics (mainly professional autonomy and NPM doctrines) and expectations (gendered as well as in terms of colliding expectations

from the different actors). While the different papers explore different aspects of this position, thus making individual contributions to different debates, the contribution of this Kappa is to tie these different aspects together to provide an answer to the research questions posted in chapter 1.

In addressing the aim to provide additional aspects to the dynamics in organisation by exploring the experience and relations from the departmental administrator's perspective, the changes brought connected to the administrators' position and role in terms internal work processes could be abstracted in terms of three themes running through the papers. These themes and connections in the papers that are the contribution to the Kappa are presented below.

2.3 The themes and connections in the papers

From the findings in the different papers, one summary finding is that the departmental administrators are located in an indeterminate position in-between different actors and logics and that this position brings tensions between different actors, increased space for agency, as well as different risks and possibilities in terms of, for example, fragmentation of their job, but also potential for increased discretion. While the theoretical framework used in the papers and for this broader analysis are presented in chapter 3, and the external forces that constitutes important aspects of the settings are presented in chapter 4, now follows an overview of how the themes of tensions, agency, risks and possibilities are connected throughout the papers.

As a main finding in this thesis is the position of the departmental administrators as an indeterminate position in-between, an important question is therefore 'in-between what?' While this in many ways might vary between individual administrators, the central aspects of in-between that run through the papers in this thesis are: In-between management and academics; formal obligations and informal considerations; "traditional" and "modern" ideas of what the job is and should be; and systems and users. This derives from the findings in the various papers and the theoretical underpinnings of these aspects of in-between is further presented and discussed in chapter 3. Now follows a presentation of the themes connecting the papers in this thesis.

Tensions

The theme of tensions between different actors and groups of actors is running through all of the papers. In paper 1, which is of more of a conceptual rather than empirical character, the tensions are explored as competing loyalties the individual faces in relation to the academic and administrative departments. These competing loyalties and the effort to display loyalty are communicated via the expectations and provision of time, in terms of prioritising certain tasks or meetings, making the everyday work in the organisation being performed on a field of tensions. In paper 2, the tensions are explored in relation to the introduction of new technology in the work place - the computerisation – and the following redistribution of administrative tasks between academics and administrators. Paper 2 focuses on the social mediation of the introduction of new technology, and the ways in which management seems to act to deflect any contestation of managerial decisions, partly transforming them to lateral conflicts between administrators and academics, which increases tensions between the groups. Paper 3 discusses the tensions between actors in the organisation in terms of the multiple sites of belonging that exists in an organisation. The formal affiliation of the department administrators in a centralised unit – an administrative department - while being physically located and to some extent socially embedded in the various academic departments, intensifies some of the tensions. These increased tensions could be considered an important part in the process of the departmental administrators emerging as a group of their own, independent site of belonging, which is a main theme in paper 3. In paper 4, the tensions between different actors and sets of actors seen in the light of effects of visibility, and the adding of the perspective “visible to whom”. As a result of restructuring, and shifting power balance between the academic and managerial structure, there are an increased number of ways of being visible, and actors to be visible to. As the hierarchies and managerial structure in the organisation change in terms of new managerial positions and a centralisation of power, the administrators must make themselves visible for these new positions in the organisation to be seen as relevant actors. At the same time, while becoming more visible in the managerial system, their work becomes more invisible to the academics in their close proximity, making their job more questioned, connected to the overall theme of tensions between administrators and

academics. These tensions, and the need to navigate between different actors, is closely connected to the agency of the group.

Agency

Agency in the papers could perhaps be considered as explored on two levels – an individual level and a group level, even though the lines are hard to draw. In paper 1, the agency of the administrators is expressed and understood as the increased room for manoeuvre between different stakeholders, connected to the general acceleration of demands and the additional means to provide time and work resulting from new ways of communicating. In paper 2, similar to paper 1, agency is explored on a more individual level. The introduction of new technology, and the subsequent change in administrative processes and division of labour, has provided room for individual administrators to job craft, shaping processes and having an influence on the content of their job. Paper 2 also explores how agency is enabled or restricted due to local traditions, organisational structures and social relationships at workplace level fuelling the argument that there are a multitude of actors and informal groups within organisations whose relations and connections shape the actions and outcomes of work and organisation. Agency is further discussed on a collective (as well as individual) level in papers 3 and 4. Paper 3 moves beyond the individual by exploring the agency of the departmental administrators as an emerging group in themselves. In that regard, paper 3 takes off where papers 1 and 2 end, with the idea that there are a multitude of loyalties and informal relations that shape the experience and content of work. Paper 3 explores how formal affiliations and informal associations foster belongings and how these belongings influence the experiences and understanding of work. In a similar way, paper 4 focuses on how the structure of the organisation enables and encourages different sets of actions. Agency in paper 4 is, to some extent, discussed in a similar manner as regarding the individuals in paper 1, in terms of manoeuvring between management and academics. The paper discusses different ways to be visible within the organisation, and how the administrators arguably use their agency to also direct their visibility towards different watchers by whom it is relevant to be seen. However, there is also an increased focus on visible output on an individual job level, and a changed direction of visibility at an organisational level. Paper 4 argues that the changed position of

the administrators is not only an effect of their agency and orientation concerning job content and aspiration, but also a reorientation to adapt to the new power structures in the organisation, where the academics are not the only, or perhaps not always the most important, group to be visible to. This changed dynamics, and the influence that social relationships have on the jobs is central in the theme of risk and possibilities.

Risk and possibilities with the position in-between

The tensions between dominant actors such as the academics and management and the increased agency of the administrators, are connected to their changing role and position within the organisation, providing both risk and possibilities. One aspect of these risks and possibilities, explored in paper 1 and further developed in paper 3, is the possibility to play out different actors against one another. In paper 1, this possibility is visible in the act of conscious double-booking of meetings, in order to avoid one meeting without coming across as disloyal, and conceptualised as the creation of loyalty conflict to reduce one's own agency, thus failing to meet expectations without the need to face consequences. This theme is further explored in paper 3, where one of the possibilities with multiple sites of belonging is the possibility to, for example, referee the administrative manager to balance demands from the academics. The obvious risk prevalent and explored in paper 3 is the risk of damaged social relationships and the difficulties to handle occasional conflicting demands and a potentially increased workload since expectations come from multiple actors at the same time.

In paper 2, the risks and possibilities are connected to the introduction of new technology, in terms of computerisation and digitalisation, and how that has changed the role of the departmental administrators. The introduction of, at the time, new technology has provided increased opportunities of job crafting and discretion as some of their tasks have been made easier with the help of computers, whereas other tasks have been relocated to be performed by academics or students. However, the benefits the departmental administrators might get in terms of time saved by the introduction of digital systems collides with the academics' resistance to the perceived job enlargement; moreover, the departmental administrators' part in implementing and introducing the academics to new digital systems makes them a target for expressions of

dissatisfaction from teachers and researchers. What may be intended as acts of resistance by the academics in response to the introduction of new technology are misdirected in terms of power relations, as they are not directed towards management, but in practice towards the administrators. As argued in paper 2, resistance in one place, by the teachers and researchers, occasionally creates hindrance in other places, for the departmental administrators in this case, increasing the lateral conflicts. Those conflicts as well as gendered patterns and perceptions of gender enable or hinder changes in various groups.

Risks and possibilities are also an apparent theme derived from paper 4, which is using visibility as a conceptual lens to explore changes in the organising of work. Different aspects, risks and possibilities, of visibility and invisibility in relation to context and social position of the subject being and becoming visible, is well debated in organisational studies sensitive to gender and power relations (Lewis and Simpson, 2012; Van Den Brink and Stobbe, 2009). The paper discusses those risks and possibilities, arguing that the effects of visibility are not just a matter of the subject becoming visible, but that the question of the location of the “seer” is highly relevant. While an increased visibility comes with the possibility to be recognised as an important actor, it also comes with the risk of the person visible being subject to more control, and the need to manifest one’s importance to different watchers. While paper 4 discusses the risk and possibilities with the emergence of more ways of being visible, and the different watchers to be visible to, it also points to the increased room for agency for the departmental administrators to aim their effort to become visible in different ways. This again relates to the changed power structures in the organisation as a result of changed external forces or ruling relations regarding visible outcome and recognition governing work in academia, which is discussed further in chapters 4 and 6.

The abstraction of these themes, the risk and possibilities in terms of tensions between management, academics and administrators, and the room for agency, leads up to an understanding of organisations as a web of multiple power centres, actors and relations, containing active agents besides management and academics, with the departmental administrators in an indeterminate position in-between agents and relations, influencing the experience and organisation of work. The four

research papers, and the overarching themes abstracted from the papers, tie into different debates central to the sociology of work and the field of workplace studies. These debates are introduced in the next chapter, while the debates connected to the historical context and the external forces influencing the organisation that constitute the case in this study are presented in chapter 4.

3 Theoretical perspectives on relations in organisations

The aim of this chapter is to locate the project within an academic tradition of workplace studies and provide an overview of theoretical frameworks that has informed the summary analysis and themes in this thesis.

I have used a number of theoretical concepts and theories in the individual studies that constitute this dissertation. These individual concepts are discussed in more detail in the different papers, connected to the different debates I wish to address in the papers. However, while the papers deal with different concepts – loyalty (paper 1), technology (paper 2), belongings (paper 3) and visibility (paper 4) – these conceptual lenses all connect to different aspects of the indeterminate position in-between that is the summary finding of this thesis. What the departmental administrators are “in-between” is here analysed as in-between: management and academics; formal and informal regulations of the job; and traditional and new expectations of the role. The analysis of this position is informed by the theoretical concepts deployed in the papers, as well as broader debates regarding gender and workplace relations, central to the field of work-life studies, that are now presented in this chapter. While the conceptual lenses deployed in the papers are described, and to some extent deployed, as discreet concepts in the papers, they are here presented and discussed under broader labels, connected to related debates within work-life studies. Loyalty (paper 1) is discussed under the subheading 3.3; technology (paper 2) is discussed related to gender in section 3.1; belongings (paper 3) foremost discussed in relation to theories of work place collectives in section 3.3 and visibility (paper 4) in section 3.2.

As the project is permeated by an understanding of the importance of gendered power relations for organisational processes, and the gendered aspects of the occupations are explicitly discussed in relation to technology in paper 2 and visibility in paper 4, this chapter starts with a discussion regarding gender in organisations, followed by an elaboration on how the connection between gender and technology and also gender and visibility is understood in this project. Thereafter follows an overview of the debates that have informed the notion of belongings, workplace collectives and relationships that are at the centre of papers 1 and 3.

This project focuses on individuals in a group, an occupational group. That means that the questions asked and even more so the analysis made, are made from the perspective of the participants being individuals in relation to their own group, as well as other groups in the organisation. Questions of belonging and experiences from work is therefore understood not only as individual traits but also part of a collective process, and is why theories of workplace collectives and work-based relationships are most relevant in this project. In all social relations informing and shaping the experience of work, power is a central aspect. Without going into the extensive debates of how power could be understood or the different ways in which power has been conceptualised within the field of work-life science and sociology of work, I want here to clarify what power refers to in this study. When power is discussed in the papers and kappa in this thesis, it is foremost in regards to power within the organisation, and to some extent in relation to power relations outside of the organisation that have an influence over the power relations within the organisation. Power in this setting is understood as the mobilisation and organisation of people's actions, a coordination of people's activities (Smith, 1990). One part of this is the influence and formation of a shared understanding of what is, what should be, and what actions need to be taken to get there. While this holds a discursive aspect, it is also the result of administrative practices and institutionalised processes, shaping people's understandings of what should be done and in what way (Smith, 1990). This coordination and usage of power is not in the hands of one sovereign ruler, nor some abstract force, but rather the result of the work of "different specialists occupying influential positions in the ideological apparatus (education system, communications etc.)" (Smith, 1987: 17) that are being a part in

shaping the perceptions and actions of individuals and organisations. The way we think about the world, and what symbols and images we are using to understand it, Smith (1987; 1990) argues, are therefore not something that arises spontaneously in our minds, but rather “manufactured”. Central aspects of this kind of power in this thesis is the tension between management and academics regarding which aims and values should govern academia; the tensions surrounding gendered occupations and support staff regarding who is to do what; and the more general power relations in society regarding the governing of public organisations, the role of professions and gendered division of labour.

3.1 Gender, organisation and technology

The notion of gender is central to the project both regarding the empirical group, that is massively female-dominated, and previous findings on secretarial occupations as gendered (Connell, 2006; Karlsson, 2011; Morgall, 1981; Truss et al., 1995). Gender in this study is an important aspect, but it is the gendering of the occupation, rather than gender in the organisation, that is at centre stage (Davies, 1996). That is – the focus is not to investigate difference of experiences between men and women within this administrative occupation, but to explore the impact of the fact that it is a heavily female-dominated occupation. While the issue of gender is not explored explicitly in a specific paper, in the way of loyalty (paper 1), technology (paper 2), belongings (paper 3) and visibility (paper 4), it is a central theme in papers 2 and 4, and in the overall themes in this thesis. The role of gender and the notion of a gendered occupations is in some way a historically constitutive part in the shaping of this occupation and occupational role. However, as to some extent argued in paper 4, the concept of gender is sometimes too broad to use as a frame, why it at times might be more relevant to focus on the specific gendered positions in their local organisational inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). While gender is inherent in all aspects of the research, and explicitly addressed in papers 2 and 4, I would like to elaborate here a little more on the understandings of gender that are most directly addressed in papers 2 and 4.

This project builds on a view of organisations as gendered processes (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2006; Davies, 1996), where the division of labour

is partly created by organisational practices. A “doing gender” understanding is used where genders as social categories are understood as reproduced and reconfirmed in the everyday interactions in organisations and society (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Occupations in themselves are seen as gendered regarding what is considered suitable jobs for men and women (Pringle, 1988; Yoder, 1991). This is considered a self-reinforcing process as “people have a gender and their gender rubs off on the jobs they mainly do. The jobs in turn have a gender character, which in turns rubs off on the people who do them” (Cockburn, 1985: 169), which affects the recognition and status connected to the job (see Ainsworth and Pekarek, 2022).

The gendering of a group, and how that has influence on what the job should consist of, needs to be understood in relation to the organisational settings and division of labour in that setting (Davies, 1996). Organisations and the organisational structure, Acker argues, are not gender neutral – they are rather constructed on underlying assumptions about gender (Acker, 1990), with visible patterns between men and women in terms of, for example, advantages, control, meaning and identities. There are ideas of what is proper behaviour for men and women and those ideas also influence what are proper jobs and what is proper job content for men and women in organisations (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1985; Pringle, 1988).

While changes occur in the job content and description of an occupation, the changes in norms and values that inform the expectation on the occupation, by the workers in these jobs as well as other related actors, might not change as quickly (Rosengren and Ottosson, 2007), which then creates conflicting expectations and tensions. This could be seen as related to gendered expectations where, in the study performed by Rosengren and Ottosson (2007: 166), the women who move from a female-type nursing role towards a male-type administrative function are questioned and challenged and sometimes perceived as a “traitor to the sex” by other nurses. This also echoes Lindgren’s (1999) findings where the women who are moving upwards in the hospital hierarchy are looked upon with suspicion as they are getting closer to the male-type medical doctors, and further from the female-type nurses.

All organisations have their own inequality regimes, consisting of interconnected sets of practices, actions and meanings, resulting in inequalities based on class, gender and race being created and renewed

through organisational practices (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2006). These inequalities in organisations are defined as “systematic disparities between participants in power and control” regarding aspects such as formulating goals, the organisation of work, access to careers or more jobs as well as pay grades and work security (Acker, 2006: 443). While there are emerging patterns of inequalities, there is also a dynamic of change and reconfirmation of the structures. What might be seen as a reduction of inequalities might sometimes merely be a reconfiguration (Acker, 2006; Lindgren, 1999); this is a theme that is developed further in paper 2. The inequalities are reproduced in the organisation of work in organisations, being influenced by, but also influencing, power relations in the surrounding society. While Acker suggests (a notion I share) that there is an intersection between different bases for inequality, gender is the primary focus in this project (foremost discussed in papers 2 and 4).

Academia as a gendered terrain is a well-discussed matter (Bird et al., 2004; Bourabain, 2021; Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim, 2022). A range of previous studies provides insights into how formal and informal arrangements reinforce gender patterns, not least regarding the allocation and organisation of work. However, while studies of gender and academia have been performed in different national and organisational contexts, the gender aspect of academia is almost exclusively explored from the standpoint of academics, which is discussed further in paper 4. Connected to the question of gender and division of labour between academics and administrators, Agevall and Olofsson (2020: 31) set the following scene:

There is also a struggle over the social and not least gender-related aspects of the division of labour, which is expressed in a status struggle between the groups. Why should (female) secretaries serve (male) professors by re-writing texts, copying articles and teaching materials (...) et cetera? (My translation)

While framed in a clear and straightforward manner in the quote above, there might also be more to add, as the issue of gender in this setting is a bit complicated. One central argument informing this project is that gendered notions affect the job, but that it could be hard to see from within the job (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2006). As the group investigated in this project, the administrators, in itself is heavily female-

dominated, it is hard to say anything about gendered differences within the group. Ackers' (1990: 142) statement that "Gender is a relational phenomenon; gender is difficult to see when only the masculine is present" could perhaps be applied a little reversed in this setting. This project is inspired by the argument put forward by Härenstam (2017: 5) to investigate occupations in themselves as (gendered) occupations, rather than focus firsthand on gender within the occupation. So, in this case, it is the gender *of* the group that is relevant, rather than gender *in* the group. That is – the central issue is the impact of this being a female-dominated group rather than the individual consequences of being a male or female departmental administrator.

While the group in focus in this study have a similar gender composition as historically has been the case, the group they are working with are changing, with more women holding academic positions (Kalm, 2019; Lindberg et al., 2011). To get back to Agevall and Olsson's (2020) note on how gender influences who is doing what regarding administrative tasks, Pringle finds when studying the relations between managers and secretaries, that female managers are sometimes faced with an "unarticulated feeling the females should be responsible for their own secretarial choirs" (Pringle, 1988: 108), resulting in them doing more of the administrative work by themselves. Likewise, Lindgren (1999: 151) finds that the nurses in her study show more acceptance of a male physician who lags behind in his paperwork compared to when a female physician does the same. On a similar note, in a study investigating gendered dimension of technological changes in white-collar work, Hughes (1996: 237) notes that "it is noteworthy that the move to integrate parts of the professional, and clerical, labour processes has coincided with the increased presence of women in this occupation". Translating these findings to the setting of this study, that would suggest that the transferring of administrative tasks from administrators towards academics also might be influenced by the increased feminisation of the academic work force. Furthering that interpretation is perhaps Kalms' (2019) study, demonstrating how women in academia increasingly perform the "academic housework", in terms of the emotional and practical care taking, that at least traditionally has been an informal part of the secretarial job. These important aspects in the contextual framing of this study, but outside the reach of this study to

explore in more detail, which is further discussed in the final chapter of this kappa.

Gender and technology

The understanding of technology in this thesis, and more directly in paper 2, is informed by debates of technology as socially mediated (Braverman, 1998; Cockburn, 1985; Joyce et al., 2023; Pringle, 1988; Williams and Edge, 1996), and the risks of an overly deterministic view of technology (Howcroft and Taylor, 2023; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Ogburn and Thomas, 1922). Organisational relationships (Hartmann et al., 1986) and economic and political factors (Edwards and Ramirez, 2016) are considered important aspects in how new technology is developed, implemented and perceived at work.

It is not, Pringle argues, technology in itself that dictates the labour process, but the mediation of new technology influenced by social relations (Pringle, 1988: 175). So, in that regard, the question of technology's impact on the job is highly relevant, in this setting phrased as how technology, and its implementation, have been used to alter the jobs, which is discussed in paper 2.

I am inspired by Cockburn's (1985) view of technology as a medium of power, and the statement that new technology reconfirms rather than alters gender relations (Cockburn, 1985: 226). The tendency that "technological changes cause tensions and movement in the relationship between [these] various groups of professional and technical employees" (Cockburn, 1985: 116) is also highly relevant in relation to my study, foremost in paper 2, as well as the concept of gendered positions related to technology. Traditionally, Cockburn (1985: 9) writes, "Women were actively excluded from technological knowledge, acted upon by the technology and not interactive with it." Women operate the machinery but have no insights in what is going on inside of them, while those who are designing technology are men. Access to technology could then be seen as access to power. The narrative of access to technology as access to power might be one aspect behind the hopes in the 1990s of how technology could liberate and advance office jobs. Shifts in technology are continuously affecting the job, sparking recurring debates whether the job will survive, for example the typewriter, the computer, the internet, or not (Pringle, 1988). While the job still remains, and to some extent has advances, the introduction of new technology

has also led up to today, with increased testimonies of people being increasingly dominated by the same technology in the form of, for example, digital administrative systems.

There is an interesting contrast between a “techno optimism” in previous research on secretarial and administrative groups (Hartmann et al., 1986; Hoffman, 1989; Skjöld, 1993; Wilhelmson, 1994), where the introduction of new technology was considered as one potential way of challenging power relations and Cockburn’s (1985) theories of technology as an instrument of power that rather reinforced than changed existing power relations, which is further discussed in paper 2. As is the discussion of the unintended consequences and indirect effects of new technology (Hughes, 1996; Reynolds, 2015), and the suggestion that changes in technology cause tension between various groups of professionals and other employees (Cockburn, 1985: 116).

There is of course a lot more to say about technology and the impact of gender and organisations, not least about administration and digitalisation. Nonetheless, it is the social relationships rather than technology in itself that are my first interest, while further inquiries into these matters are outside the scope of this study. There is, however, another point of intersection between technology, social relations and gender that is directly linked to the indeterminate position in between, and further explored in paper 4 – the issue of visibility.

3.2 Visibility, Recognition and Control

Gender and Visibility

The issue of visibility in organisations, and what impact it may have on different groups is a topic of debate. Visibility is here, and in paper 4, is understood as being fully regarded and recognised by others, where your work is noticed, acknowledged and valued (Buchanan and Settles, 2019; Smith and Cheng-Cimine, 2023). An influential contribution to this debate was made by Kanter (1993), who using the term visibility related to the extra attention paid to, or scrutinization of, those who deviated from the norm or majority. Kanter (1993) argued that visibility was foremost a numbers game where individuals belonging to a minority become more visible in a negative way. She found it to be a token

effect, meaning that the individual belonging to a minority in any group configuration experienced pressure to adopt one of few stereotypical roles and were viewed as representatives for their group, rather than independent individuals. In that case, invisibility would be desirable. Others have since argued that it is not merely a matter of being in the minority, but rather about the minority's social status in relation to the majority group (Simpson and Lewis, 2005; Yoder, 1991). Lewis and Simpson (2012) revisit Kanter's study to explore hidden dynamics of gendered power, arguing that while "invisibility" in one situation may be a sign of power and privilege, it might also "invisibilise" merits and potential (Lewis and Simpson, 2012: 152). Visibility for a minority group might be considered something problematic, leading to exclusion and being seen as an outsider. At the same time, efforts made by women to blend into the dominating masculinity norms in organisations - to become invisible - might lead to women's performances also becoming invisible and "disappearing". On a similar note, Acker (2006: 450) finds a study of Swedish banks that "male employees were more visible to male managers than were female employees", a tendency they believe might be one reason behind an increased wage gap in the organisation. Likewise, in a study on gender and visibility among students undertaking an academic education, Van Den Brink and Stobbe (2009) found that the female students in a male-dominated field, on the one hand tried to make themselves invisible as "being visible as a woman excludes them from being seen as competent" (Van Den Brink and Stobbe, 2009: 462), while at the same time felt the need to stand out and make themselves visible in order to not be ignored as a marginalised minority.

The importance of who is being visible is also argued by Simpson and Lewis (2005). They find that the invisibility of women leads to them being overlooked, silenced and "hidden from history" (Simpson and Lewis, 2005: 1263), while the invisibility of men signifies a 'strong presence' as their invisibility "emanates from the transparency that accompanies the norm" (ibid). Claims for recognition and visibility for an excluded group could expose and challenge existing social differences and norms in order to achieve change (Simpson and Lewis, 2005). For a dominant group, on the other hand, to be invisible means being out of sight and out of reach for the critical gaze. In that regard, the invisibility is a privilege of power assuring the position as the centre of the norm.

The effects of visibility hence differ given the position of the subject in the social structure meaning that the question of visibility has a clear gender aspect.

This dynamic of visibility is not just an individual matter, but connected to jobs and occupations, where tasks or functions are more or less visible. As female-dominated occupations tend to be lumped together, given general and vague descriptions, the usage of skills and responsibilities might be obscured as a result of the vagueness of the job. (Acker, 2006: 448). The impact of such vagueness is further explored, mainly in papers 2 and 4.

Returning to the academic organisations, Collinson (2006) finds that faculty administrators experience an invisibility in relation to their academic colleagues, not least when the jobs run smoothly and there are no direct problems that highlight their line of work. While their study concerns administrative staff within a university, or hybrid occupations, there is also a lot of unrecognised work being performed by (mostly female) academics in terms of all the "emotional and social lubricant for an institution" (Kalm, 2019: 11), to make everyday work work. This type of "academic household work" or "institutional housekeeping" is often performed by women and seldom recognised (Bird et al., 2004). While prevalent in organisations, this arguably reflects structures in society, as the social reproductive work of this kind is a societal necessity which the capitalist systems depend on, but fail to recognise (Fraser, 2016).

The issue of visibility should therefore also be understood in connection to the external forces that surrounds the explored organisations. This is briefly introduced here, but discussed further in the next chapter, and in paper 4. But to put the issue of visibility into a context, one could see that the influence of managerial elements connected to the wider doctrine of New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995), has led to an increased marketisation of academia, with increased focus on output and productivity (Leišytė, 2016; Thomas and Davies, 2002). The impact of these external forces is gendered, where female-typed jobs and weaker professions are more impacted and less able to resist New Public Management inspired reforms (Ackroyd et al., 2007; Björk et al., 2011). The increased focus on output and measurability, combined with the increased possibility to gather performance data via digital systems, makes the monitoring of indicators of success

and progress a key part of management strategies (Hall, 2012; Hall, 2014). This puts pressure on different functions within organisations to be visible and measurable in order to come across as efficient and necessary (De Coster and Zanoni, 2019). This development has created a new set of masculinity ideals in the academic organisations, where one strategy to get along for women is to comply with the masculine norm, focusing on competition and individual career building rather than the traditional role of support and care (Thomas and Davies, 2002). This has an impact beyond the academic staff, as the aspects of care and carefulness that traditionally have been a vital part of administrative service work are also being “redefined along the lines of an economic rationality of relations” (Karlsson, 2011: e152), making what is measurable and visible more valued, whereas other aspects of the occupations become systematically devalued. However, while the increased managerialism in academia seems to have cemented existing gender patterns regarding the academic positions (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019), it is less explored how the increased importance of measurability influences the role of administrative support functions. This is discussed further in paper 4.

There is also another aspect of visibility central in paper 4, putting the process of visibility in context to the process of labour. As jobs become more visible, or rather, when the specific tasks performed by a worker become more visible to management, the process of labour could also become the subject of more control and fragmentation. As highlighted in previous sections regarding the development of secretarial and administrative occupations, and discussed in paper 2, there was a development where the secretarial jobs were divided into more fragmented parts, and reorganised to be performed by centralised units that then became specialists in those specific subparts of the job. The increased visibility of each task made them easier to control and optimise by management in terms of efficiency and output. This tendency is at the centre of Braverman’s (1998) analysis of the development of the capitalistic system of production. With the development of new technology and the “scientification” of the labour process, each step of a task could be closely studied, measured and optimised. When the jobs were performed by individual craftsman or workers, the actual process of labour remained hidden and out of control of the managers. As long as the skilled labourer possesses a knowledge advantage regarding how the

work is done, they are well-positioned to protest or obstruct, risking the surplus. Capital, via managers and technicians, needs to gain knowledge of every step in the process of production to gain control over the production of value. When knowing the process, that knowledge can be monopolised by the capitalist, refined by engineers and divided into subparts. The deskilling of each task makes it possible to speed up the pace of production to maximise the output, and makes it easier to replace the individual worker, and replace workers with machines. The clerical workers have, according to Braverman (1998), undergone a similar evolution as the productive labour on the shop floor. As they grew in number, their tasks became more fragmented and broken down into smaller pieces. The work was thus deskilled, with more routines and increasingly replaced by mechanical machines and computers. At centre of this analysis, if not formulated in those terms, are the questions of visibility. In short – when the job performed becomes more visible in all its components, it also becomes a potential target for fragmentation and control by management, leaving less control in the hands of the worker. This tension between recognition and control, or risk and possibilities connected to visibility, is the main topic of paper 4.

The storyline in Braverman (1998) is that of the clash between workers (at all levels and all functions) and capital (including the managers and managerial system). What is less focused on in the relations and power struggles within different groups of workers (and managers) is the existence of resistance and alternative actions, an issue discussed in paper 2. This ties into a larger tendency: when discussed in terms of measurability and visibility, organisations sometimes come across as uniform and with a clear centre position by whom it is important to be seen, measured and valued. In this study, however, organisations are understood to contain a plurality of sectional groups (Fox, 1969), bringing a multitude of attachments and loyalties that informs the actions of the organisation members (March and Simon, 1993). This is a theme further developed in paper 3. The study is based on the idea that social arrangements are a process of continuous renegotiation and re-interpretation between people, where the organisation is constantly evolving and reconstructing through social practices (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). The organisation is understood to consist of sets of norms, or ruling relations, concerning what is considered important

and relevant, and what is not, informing and guiding the coordination of the interpretations of what one should do or not (Smith, 2005). These belongings and expectations of loyalties to groups and subgroups within all organisations create tensions and conflicts that are “omnipresent features of organisational life” (March and Simon, 1993: 13) as one need to handle different perceived obligations (Hart and Thompson, 2007), for example, to prioritise tasks and show up on shared meetings and gatherings (this aspect is developed further in paper 1). To whom one is visible therefore matters to the social relationships at workplace level, as organisations arguably consist of different subgroups and collectives. These different types of workplace-based social relationships such as work collectives, loyalties and belongings are now discussed further.

3.3 Work place dynamics and collectives

An almost (by definition) key term to any consideration of workplace dynamics and collectives is the notion of belonging. It is of no surprise that the term and its meaning in different ways is one of long-running debates within the sociological tradition (May and Winter, 2009). The study of relations between individuals and groups is perhaps what defines sociology as a discipline, from investigations into the social psychology of the human mind (Mead, 1934); the relation between individuals and groups (Cooley, 1929; Goffman, 1990; Simmel, 2010); the social relations making up society (Marx, 1993); our social construction and distribution of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1991), and the notions of everyday reality (Garfinkel, 1984), branching off into studies of our behaviour in organisations. Drawing from this, an assumption is made in this thesis that humans always belong to, have desires for, or relate to, one group or another, in an ongoing process of social organising. Or, put slightly differently: “In the beginning there is organisation. The basic human experience is belonging and dependence.” (Ahrne, 2009: 5). Belongings, and the organising of these belongings, are in that regard a central aspect of human activities.

As mentioned earlier, the term belonging has a long history of usage in sociological theory, containing aspects such as social locations,

identification, emotional attachments and values (Yuval-Davis, 2006). While belongings could be seen as the individual's experience of feeling a part of a surrounding system, belongings are also dependent on the individual's capability, and opportunity (Allen et al., 2021) to act in accordance with social norms, which influence others' perceptions of whether the individual belongs.

These belongings are formed in our everyday practices, and partake in shaping identification and social relations. Rather than being static, belongings are changing over time, as the world around us changes (May, 2011: 372). These belongings are not something that only exist within an individual, but also need to be manifested and recognised by those who gatekeep who is seen as belonging and who is not (Allen et al., 2021) - this is discussed further in paper 3. The actions of confirmation must therefore also be visible to the appropriate watcher, which is a theme in paper 4. The provision of time and efforts could be used as a communicative medium (Zerubavel, 1987), as a way of confirming our connections to others (Coser, 1974; Fletcher, 1995), which is explored on a conceptual level in paper 1. In paper 1, the social construction of time is discussed in relation to loyalties and loyalty conflicts. It is also in paper 1 where the concept of loyalty is mainly debated, while the usage of the concept as developed in paper 1, is used in paper 3 as part of the discussion regarding sites of belonging within organisations.

As a concept, loyalty has a history both as an everyday term and within different scientific disciplines (Arvidson and Axelsson, 2017), often without giving a clear defined meaning (Connor, 2007). Leaving the everyday understanding of loyalty aside, the debates and usage of the concept of loyalty in different disciplines seems to be taking place loosely connected to one another (Arvidson and Axelsson, 2017; Karlberg, 2021). In this project, more specifically discussed in papers 1 and 3, loyalties are considered a fundamental aspect of humans as social beings, which also has been argued by Ewin (1992), Kleinig (2014) and Grodzins (1956), among others. While this might come across as a bit of a radical assumption far from the everyday usage of the term, I think it is a quite undramatic and useful way of using the concept. Where Grodzin argues that to talk about human beings without loyalties would be a contradiction in terms (Grodzins, 1956: 5-7), Kleinig (2014: 87) holds loyalties as a "necessary feature of human

life”, and Ewin suggests loyalty as a willingness to stick to the group, without which (Ewin, 1992: 419) we should all be isolated asocial atoms. Their arguments of loyalties as something fundamental, a way of organising and connecting us as humans, also ties in to the view of human societies as a process of ongoing coordination and socialisation (Mead, 1934; Smith, 1999). While this is the foundation for the broad understanding of loyalty in this study, the way in which it is used in paper 1 and paper 3 is in relation to behaviour; as actions to take, to be accepted as part of a group or association. This behavioural focus is influenced by Hart and Thompson’s (2007) exploration of loyalties related to psychological contracts and Lysgaard’s (2001) theory of the competing systems active within work organisations. This reading of Lysgaard might need a bit of clarification. While loyalty is neither defined nor used as an analytical concept in Lysgaard’s book *Arbeiderkollektivet*, the meaning of the concept could perhaps be understood by how it is used in the study. One element is the obedience to behavioural rules – to be loyal is to act loyal, and not to show up in too fancy a hat or to exceed the informally decided level of production (Lysgaard, 2001: 69). Exactly what rules are broken and in what way is not the important point – it might be a hat or speeding up production – the point is that loyalty is manifested in actions (or the avoidance of certain actions such as talking too friendly with managers), and that the rules for passing as loyal might be complex and various. Loyalty with Lysgaard is not a strict individual matter as he discusses the organisation in terms of colliding systems, where the collective system of workers buffers the human system from the never-ending demands of the technical-economic system. The collective system of workers (*arbeiderkollektivet*) is a “protective community that develops among subordinates” (Lysgaard, 2001: 78). To be accepted as a member of the collective, one must contribute and “make their loyal efforts for the good of the system” (Lysgaard, 2001: 128). Anyone that fails to do so, will have to face the consequences, such as social isolation. At the same time, the technical-economic system also demands loyalty, such as a minimum rate of production and for the worker to act for the good of the company. Failing to do so might lead to termination of the employment. To be loyal is to be playing by the rules, to keep the “norm for good comradery” (Lysgaard, 2001: 139). By being loyal to the collective system of workers, it can protect the individual

from the consequences of acting in a less loyal way towards the technical-economic system. However, it is also a subordination under the collective that might be costly both socially and career-wise.

This dynamic of competing claims of loyalty, together with debates of collective identity and occupational communities that are presented below, have been an important part in introducing the concepts of sites of belonging in paper 3.

Debates of identities, collectives and loyalties are central within the sociology of work, and key issues in analysing the organisation of work (Alvesson, 2000; Axelsson et al., 2019; Guillon and Cezanne, 2014; Korczynski, 2003; Lysgaard, 2001; MacKenzie et al., 2006; Salaman, 1971; Salaman, 1974; Skorstad and Karlsson, 2020). Different approaches capture different aspects of organisations and complement each other, and have, in different ways, informed this project. While these debates are most directly discussed in paper 3, and the concept of loyalty is mainly explored in paper 1, the ideas of workplaces as contested ground (Edwards, 1979), containing different groups of actors and interests, are central in this thesis. In this project, organisations are seen as containing a plurality of different, often conflicting, sectional interests and subcategories. Organisations are understood to contain a multitude of attachments and loyalties (Fox, 1969; Lysgaard, 2001) that inform the actions of the organisation members (March and Simon, 1993).

The experiences from work, of having some, losing some or wanting some, could arguably be considered a crucial element in individual identification and the construction of an identity (MacKenzie et al., 2006). This construction of identity could be considered not merely as an individual project, but has also been conceptualised as a collective process (see eg. Strangleman, 2012). Occupational identities, collective identifications and the understanding of work as a collective experience, have long been an important aspect in studying workplace collectives (Goldthorpe et al., 1969; MacKenzie et al., 2006; Salaman, 1974; Strangleman, 2001; Strangleman, 2012). Crucial in the development of an occupational identity is the notion of shared history, norms and values (MacKenzie et al., 2017; Salaman, 1971). The formation of such work identities is an ongoing project (Strangleman, 2012) and part of a contested terrain, where different identities might be mobilised by different actors within organisations to legitimise or resist changes

(Humphreys and Brown, 2002; McDonald et al., 2006). An important prerequisite of the formation of occupational identities is the perceived similarity to each other and differences between others (Jenkins, 2014; Salaman, 1974) in the line of work. These kinds of work-based relationships and shared identities could also spill over and influence life outside of work (Strangleman, 2001), in the formation of occupational communities (Salaman, 1974). The shared values and perceptions of distinct attributes tied to the members of the occupational communities are strengthening the collective identity (Bechky, 2006), as communities are “among the most important sources of collective identification” (Jenkins, 2014: 135). These occupational communities are rooted in work practices (Bechky, 2006), where factors such as physical proximity, the experience of dangerous or physically demanding jobs, requirements of specific technical skills and informal mentoring, might strengthen the sense of community (Orr, 2006; Salaman, 1971). However, the tendency that groups outside of a dominant occupation could be included as members of a community via shared history and experiences (McLachlan et al., 2019; Salaman, 1974) is an important insight, opening up the possibility for peripheral membership to workers outside of the dominant group, as discussed further in paper 3.

However, a peripheral or challenged position might foster the development of other belongings. The idea of external pressure as foundation for self-organisation discussed in paper 3, is inspired by Lysgaard’s (2001; also Axelsson et al. (2019)) concept of workers acting collectively as a protective buffer, emerging as a response to the pressure from the techno-economic system, (presented below), and Korczynski’s (2003) concept of “communities of coping”. Korczynski (2003) argues that service personnel and front-line workers tend to create informal communities of coping where they turn to one another for support, as a way of coping with abusive customers. The emergence of additional sites of belonging might, as argued in paper 3, be considered both a result of similarities and shared identification (Jenkins, 2014) – a pull toward each other - and also as a result of being questioned or challenged by other groups (Korczynski, 2003; Lysgaard, 2001) – a push away from others. There is also an important distinction between the identification with an *occupational* belonging and an *organisational* belonging (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019; Van Maanen and Barley,

1984), where the content and implication of the identification might alter and shift over time. Van Maanen and Barley (1984) differentiate between an organisational perspective on belonging and an occupational perspective, where the former focuses on hierarchical movement, prestige, power, and rewards within an organisation, whereas the latter emphasises the social, moral, physical, and intellectual character of the work itself. In addition to that, one can argue that organisational belonging foremost is a construct of management, tying the worker closer to the organisation, whereas occupational belonging is controlled and established by the workers as part of keeping their autonomy and control over work practices (Van Maanen and Berly, 1984). In practice, the occupational and organisational belongings are intertwined as members of occupational communities often have dual loyalties to their occupation and their employing organisation (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984), while at the same time occupations transcend work organisations, making individuals subject to multiple reference points of identification (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008). These lines of reasoning are developed in paper 3.

A slightly different conceptualisation, with arguably a greater focus on the mechanisms behind the formation of collectives, is provided by Lysgaard (2001) who uses the terms “Arbeiderkollektivet” (worker collectivity (Axelsson et al., 2019)) to describe the informal association of workers within capitalist companies. The work organisations are described as containing different systems – the techno-economical system and the human system - that are difficult to combine. Whereas the “human system”, constituted by the common denominators that makes us human, contains limited resources (that is – humans cannot work endlessly without getting worn out, suffer and die), the demands on constant growth and production are endless. Therefore, the demands from the techno-economic system threaten the very foundation of the human system – our essential beings as humans. The worker collectivity, Lysgaard argues, is the workers’ response to the demands from the technical-economical system, where workers more or less formally join together and develop their own norms and counterstrategies to buffer the never-ending demands of work and production (Axelsson et al., 2019; Karlsson, 2015; Skorstad and Karlsson, 2020). The process

of emerging group formations in work organisation, conceptualised as the emergence of sites of belonging, is explored in paper 3.

So far, this chapter has mainly been concerned with the different debates connected to the four different papers, although some concepts, such as gender, inform several papers and run through the project as a whole. The debates presented above are also, in different ways, connected to the themes of tensions between groups, the potential for agency and risk and possibilities connected to a changed role that are abstracted from the papers. Tensions based in gender norms, either within the status quo or in relation to changes in technology and organisational structures, is a well-rehearsed theme in the debates presented above regarding gender, technology and visibility, which also are highlighted in this chapter. Tensions within work organisations are also central in different conceptualisations of workplace relationships such as belongings, loyalties and worker collectives of different kinds, as discussed above. A similar argument could be made regarding risk and possibilities connected to changed positions and multiple affiliations. These are themes running through debates on gender, connected to technology and visibility, and conceptualisations of work-based relationships, perhaps most clearly so in connection to loyalties and the competing systems in work organisations.

There remains, then, the question of agency. While this is a theme that is also present in the different aspects and conceptualisations of social relations presented in this chapter, the room and effect of agency exercised by a group on the outskirts of the dominating power structures, are perhaps less well debated. It is present in the debates regarding the effects of visibility related to social position of the ones being more or less visible, but perhaps mostly on an individual level. Likewise, the debates regarding agency other than direct based in a dichotomy between management and workers – or in this case, professions - has perhaps mostly focused on what the individual can choose between in terms of taking sides with either management or professions, rather than what they might change or become in their own right. The exploration of the impact of agency of a group outside of the dominant power structures in an organisation is therefore a central theme in this project.

While the discussed conceptualisations and exploration regarding gender, technology and relationships are important to understand the

dynamics at work, we also need to locate these dynamics as related to the dominating relations and external forces outside the direct arena of the study, to extend the case beyond the particular to the general. The historical and social context of this case is therefore the main topic of the next chapter.

4 Previous research on administrators and New Public Management in academia

This chapter provides the context of the case in terms of the changed role of secretarial and administrative work, and the changed roles and relations in academia as being influenced by external forces such as New Public Management doctrines. As the themes identified in this project – the risk and possibilities with their position in-between, tensions between groups in the organisation and the agency of the department administrators – are analysed and understood in relation to these changes on a more general level, as influenced by external forces, some more elaborate background in these areas is relevant. The purpose with this chapter is therefore to give some historical background to the occupational role now labelled departmental administrators and the changed managerial logic and social relationships within academia. For the interested reader, a more comprehensive overview of the historical role of secretaries could, for example, be found with Davies (1982).

This case study is set against a background of changes in the administrative, previous secretarial, role arguably partly as a process of changes regarding female-dominated service occupations towards more specialised positions (a theme developed in paper 2), and partly as a result of organisational changes influenced by New Public Management (NPM) doctrines (Hood, 1991; SOU 2018:38). As the term of NPM tends to be used as a catch-all term, arguably already from its initial usage (Hood, 1995), some more specific aspects of the general ideas labelled NPM is discussed later on in this chapter. First follows a brief overview of the changed role of secretaries, turning into administrators, which provides a background to the expectations connected to this group.

As an initial remark, secretaries or administrative service workers are rarely investigated. When they are investigated, it tends to be with clear

assumptions of what to find or how to describe them (Karlsson, 2011) – often as problematic dead-end jobs on the bottom rung of the organisational or occupational hierarchies, without much agency of their own. While the dynamics and strategies between management and the professions have been a topic of much consideration, there are some gaps in research regarding the groups caught in the middle. However, as administration and governing are related in practice, administration within academia is relevant to investigate from a sociological point of view (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020: 8), which brings us to the group that is focused upon in this project.

As mentioned, the function of this chapter is to provide a background to the development of the organisational role of administrative support that is provided by the group of administrators in universities that are the main concern of these thesis. The aim is not to write the history of secretarial occupations in Sweden and beyond, but to provide some background to the traditions and expectations that might be connected to these kinds of administrative services of today. Initially one might ask why we should be concerned with secretarial occupations when this is an exploration of a certain kind of administrator. The short answer, developed a little in paper 2, is that until about 20 years ago, this occupational group were called secretaries, with different prefixes such as departmental secretary, project secretary or course secretary. Since then, they have been renamed administrators (with different prefixes), as part of the process of changing the function and job content. While the term department administrators is used in this study, it is relevant to note that this group share the history of the secretarial occupation, as the historical context also influences the perceptions of the role today. These perceptions, in turn, might influence the expectations of what the job should be, from the viewpoint of both administrators and academics, shaping the social relationships within the organisation.

4.1 From secretaries to administrators

We have a problem as secretaries that nobody knows what to call us. A secretary could be a typist or it could be a full-blown personal assistant or administrative officer' (Pringle, 1988: 1)

The term secretary can be traced a long way back in history. The Oxford English Dictionary dates the first mentions of the title to the year 1387,

referring to them as “one who is entrusted with private or secret matters”. A slightly different, perhaps more modern usage, is found in the year 1433, as “one whose office it is to write for another”. The term then occurs in a range of combined forms throughout time, such as state secretary, first secretary and even in the name of the South African raptorial Secretary bird (OED, 2023). That is however outside the scope of this study.

To select a point of departure, one could take the lead of Braverman (1998), who argues that the stratum of modern clerical workers and secretaries was born “in the last decades of the nineteenth century and tremendously enlarged since” (Braverman, 1998: 203). Before that, clerical workers filled roles similarly to present-day professional managers, and acted as the prolonged arm of the capitalists and entrepreneurs of their time (Edwards, 1979); so, these clerical occupations had little to do with the modern clerks and secretaries who could be considered the forerunners of today’s occupation of departmental administrator. While the “historical” clerical workers were a male-dominated occupation (prior to 1870, almost all clerical workers were men (Davies, 1982)), often acting as a well-paid specialised part of management, this new stratum of clerks was increasingly-female dominated (which has been the case since about 1930 (Davies, 1982)), with a substantially lower pay grade, performing more routine tasks and administrative services. Braverman (1998) describes the role of the secretaries as a function moving away from being a key person close to higher management and executives, towards a more routinised and depersonalised function organised in centralised support units. While arguably different from the “traditional” clerical worker that had been a prolonged part of management, even the modern secretaries from the early 1900s initially had the characters of a personal assistant tied to high level managers. But as the numbers of secretaries in organisations increased drastically and the access to a personal assistant or secretary trickled down the managerial ranks to lower-level managers and professionals, the exclusiveness decreased while the costs for the organisations increased.

The chase to cut those costs, combined with the development of new office technology, brought a remodelling of the secretarial services, where they went from being tied to specific managers or professionals, to be organised in centralised units carrying out discrete tasks under

closer supervision (Davies, 1982). This remodelling, Braverman (1998) argues, was an attempt for upper management to gain closer control over the administrative tasks in order to keep costs at a minimum. The argument was that close relations between middle managers and their secretaries led to the labour time of the secretaries being used “wastefully and inefficiently” as the secretaries were only subject to “relaxed and friendly supervision by a superior who is more interested in personal convenience than in office efficiency” (Braverman, 1998: 237). To end this “social office”, the secretarial functions were therefore broken down into more detailed operations divided between different centralised units of administrative workers (see also Kanter, 1993). This development was made possible (but not forced) by the introduction of office technology such as telephones and recording devices, which made it easier to centralise typing pools and other administrative services in specialised functions shared by an organisation to maximise the output of each employee. The further influence of new technology in terms of computers is a central theme in paper 2.

Bradley et al. (1984) describe these changes occurring in the 1970s, as an “inflation in the title secretary”, when everybody who worked in an office came to hold that title. How this came to be will now be discussed. Similar to Braverman (1998), Bradley et al (1984) describe the role of the individual secretary as transforming - from being tied to a manager and carrying out a variety of tasks using a range of skills, to be transformed to more of a traditional “women's role” that was valued poorly and whose resource was not utilised (Bradley et al., 1984). The job changed to a more general service function with low status. What the job consisted of was hard to describe and varied a lot between offices, and local managers. The lack of “job descriptions that correspond to their actual duties” is something that Ressler (1985: 137) notes and applies to the group of clerks in public administration in general, in line with Bradley's (1984) argument that even in the professional role of the secretary, the job has always have been “hazy”. With the inflation of the job title, it also became a “dead-end job” without any demands or use of competent staff to carry out the work (Bradley et al., 1984). This development could be seen as an unintended consequence of attempts to increase gender equality and upgrading women's positions in work-life by raising the status of other female-dominated office jobs, such as assistants. As secretaries at that time held a higher organisational

position than different types of assistants, one strategy was to give the title secretaries to other occupational groups as well, to strengthen their position. However, Bradley (et al., 1984) finds that it resulted in a situation where every female office employee was given the title secretary, creating an inflation in the title, turning in to the “dead-end job” described above. Similar arguments are provided by Hartmann et al. (1986: 33), finding that the title secretary tends to be used as “a catch-all category for any office worker who performs a variety of tasks that support the work of someone else, usually a manager or professional”. The gender of the occupation, and the change from being male-dominated to be dominated by women, has been argued as central in this process. Davies (1982: 175) concludes her historical overview of the secretarial occupation with the statement that “The nineteenth-century clerk had not turned into a proletarian; he had merely turned into a woman”.

While the term secretary is used all over the world, there are similarities as well as differences in what the job entails in different settings (Pringle, 1988). In a comparative study of secretarial occupations in England, France and Germany, Truss (1993) argued that while there are some differences regarding job content and educational background between secretaries in these different contexts, there were similarities in terms of the lack of formal career ladders, and the reliance of personal relationships to develop one’s role and position. Truss finding that “It appeared to be up to the individual secretary to progress her career in an opportunistic manner, often relying on being ‘spotted’ by a more senior person in the hierarchy and moving up to be his or her secretary, or working for a boss who was herself moving up the hierarchy and taking her secretary with her” (Truss, 1993: 574) (which echoes the findings of Pringle (1988) who studied secretaries in an Australian context and Kanter’s (1993) findings in a North American company). This lack of a clear career ladder and difficulties reaching promotions remained in a follow-up study performed by Truss 20 years after the initial study (Truss et al., 2013).

Truss (1993) also concludes that the job is different in different national settings connected to the general construction of femininity and attitudes towards women’s work in various countries. In countries where “women’s work patterns are most similar to those of men, and attitudes towards women working is more favourable, then domestic

tasks normally associated with women's work constitutes a less significant part of the secretarial work" (Truss, 1993: 577). This agrees with Bradley et al. (1984: 211) findings that in the secretarial job, "gender and professional role are interwoven", emphasising the gendered nature of the occupation (see also Pringle (1988)) for a deeper discussion on the co-creation of gender and sexuality in the construction of the secretarial role). This is a theme further discussed in papers 2 and 4. In a perhaps not scientific, but nonetheless interesting book, *Secretary in the world* [sekreterare i världen] (Bäcklund, 1990), there are a collection of interviews with secretaries around the world. Bäcklund (1990) found that while secretaries around the world conduct similar work tasks under similar conditions, there are differences in status and workplace relations across different countries, which brings us to the Swedish case.

With the exceptions of some slightly older studies (Blomqvist, 1999; Bradley et al., 1984; Bäcklund, 1990; Hoffman, 1989; Nilsson, 2000; Paijkull, 1991; Zingmark, 1997) that are discussed below, there is not that much written regarding secretaries in Sweden, even though administration within academia has started to attract some attention as a field of investigation (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020: 7). The point of departure taken in this study regarding secretaries in Sweden, which is also the point of departure in paper 2, is a governmental suggestion regarding the use of computers in the public administrations and the debate regarding the future of secretarial services that followed. As part of an ongoing computerisation agenda, the Swedish government suggested in 1987 that the computer skills of secretaries within the national public administration needed to be strengthened (Proposition, 1987/88:95). Following that, a fear of being replaced by computers co-existed with the hope and potential of advancing the position of the occupation. These perceived risks and possibilities are further explored in paper 2, whereas this transformation of the role could be seen in relation to the development of the occupational group as an emerging group in themselves, as discussed in paper 3. If repetitive or low-skilled tasks that could be handled more efficiently with a computer, this might free up time to develop more qualified tasks and responsibilities. It might also be a way to gain increased visibility, and with that recognition within the organisations. That is discussed further in paper 4.

Some years after the governmental proposition (Proposition, 1987/88:95) was made, there was (and still is today) a debate within secretarial occupations about the future of the work. Paijkull (1991) finds that even with the increased use of technology, much of the “traditional secretarial duties” such as taking notes, handling mail and correspondence and the social functions as a cohesive force at the workplace, remain the same, but the job is broadening to contain more system administration and support to other users (Paijkull, 1991). Interviewed in a paper, author Madeleine von Hedland express her thoughts as “The labour market is undergoing an explosive renewal process and the secretary, yes she will disappear, she is the last rest of the old patriarchy, the bourgeois society” (Kurowska, 1996). Others express a different view, that the secretary could never really get replaced, but that the content and character of the work might change drastically towards a more professionalised narrowed function (see Pringle (1988) and Truss et al. (2013) regarding standpoints in that debate). Bradley et al. (1984) predicted, about 40 years ago, a positive development of the professional role of the secretaries, but that it would require a clearer definition of the job function (Bradley et al., 1984: 159), as a way of gaining recognition (see paper 4 for further investigation into risk and possibilities connected to visibilities in work organisations). To what extent that seems to be realised is discussed in paper 2 and, to some extent, in papers 3 and 4.

The debate regarding the influence of new technology on occupations did not start in Sweden, nor with the secretarial occupation. They are, however, very much alive in the occupation today, not least connected to administration in academia. The Nat Net, a network for exchange of experiences between secretaries and administrative staff at a number of Swedish universities, claimed in 1999 that even though the organisational structure and activities on a shallow level look quite different between different universities, if one looks closer, the similarities outnumber the differences (Blomqvist, 1999). They point out a trend in the late 1990s of merging departments to larger units, and reorganising of the administrative workforce. Perhaps most significant is the reduction of administrative staff in relation to student numbers, as growing student groups were not met with new employment, but with a higher workload. That is a similar development as highlighted in a study of the psychosocial work conditions for administrators at Uppsala university

(Zingmark, 1997). Even though there was an ongoing movement towards a professionalisation process, there is still a tension between 'proletarianism' and professionalism. In Blomqvist's words - in some workplaces the administrator is still a maid, in others an independent specialist (Blomqvist, 1999), as the administrative job within some universities has become more well defined with fewer, but more qualified tasks (Nilsson, 2000).

So far, these are some short remarks of the development of the secretarial jobs in Sweden in general, and in academia in particular, and the transformation to the current title of administrators. However, the context of the job, the societal and organisational setting, has also undergone significant changes, arguably connected to the influence of New Public management doctrines. This is an important aspect, as it has a great influence over this case, and is addressed next.

4.2 New public management and changed relations in academia

This section first discussed the influence of new public management (NPM) in general, and the changes within academia as a result of NPM and EU directives. Thereafter, this development is connected more closely to the changed roles regarding administrative work within the academic organisations, and tied in to other, simultaneous ongoing trends.

This study is located within a Swedish public university. While it is set in a public organisation, some aspects might be similar in the private sector, not least since public organisations increasingly take the form of hybrids; that are partly publicly-owned and governed, while in other parts, they are private enterprises (see Christensen and Læg Reid, 2011). The study is also situated within a broader debate in society regarding the management and administration within public organisations, often connected to the perhaps vague notion of New Public Management (NPM). The "new" in New Public Management refers to its relation to previous paradigms for managing the public sector, labelled as "progressive public management" (Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995). Within the paradigm of progressive public management, the traditional professions (professors, doctors, teachers for example) had the decision-

making power. The main philosophy was that these professions, if left alone, would make the best decisions regarding organisational practices within their area of expertise. The quality of the sector would be ensured by proper procedures and processes, and any corrupting influences from politicians or profit-seeking market actors needed to be held at arm's length. This was altered within the mega-trend of NPM, Hood (1995) argues. It was now rather the self-interest of the professions that was argued as needed to be kept in line by management specialists, and the quality was to be ensured by competition between different actors and measurable outcomes, rather than the correctness of formal processes. The profit-seeking private sector was to be seen as a role model and source of inspiration, rather than a corrupting force (Hood, 1995).

The power and discretion of the old professions within the progressive public management were, in that regard, challenged by the logic of the new public management, where professional managers and organisational specialists are given increased power (Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995). This meant a changing power dynamic within public professional organisations, such as universities. The general trend could be described as going from the professionals' own discretion to make decisions in a bureaucratic organisation, towards an adaption of universal management concepts carried out by professional managers, as the old professions have been challenged by new (Hasenfeld, 2009). That general change in management logic is far from new (Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995), nor is the implication for universities (Trow, 1994). The tensions are regarding conflicting logics rather than just interpersonal, as "Professionals in organisations face two normative systems that are largely antithetical. Professions emphasises autonomy; organisations, interdependence" (Evans, 1987: 65). Authority in the former is based on expertise, in the later on formal position. Certain aspects of this development, such as the growth of an "administrative society" (Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014), where more and more administration in terms of reports and the provision of key figures is expected to be produced by different professions, and the "audit society" in terms of increased focus on accountability and provision of key figure indicators (Power, 1997), has been a topic of debate for a long time, inside as well as outside of academia (SOU 2018:38). Its impact on public organisations in various countries has been investigated by a range of

researchers (for example Ackroyd et al., 2007; De Coster and Zanoni, 2019; Ese, 2019; Hasenfeld, 2009; Hood, 1995; Leišytė, 2016; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019; Thomas and Davies, 2002; Trow, 1994; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). NPM doctrines have had impact on the work conditions and relations to management for professions such as teachers and physicians (Bejerot et al., 2015), with a higher workload and less support from management as a result. However, the impact varies between different sectors and occupations. Previous studies suggest that female-typed jobs and weaker professions are more impacted and less able to resist New Public Management inspired reforms (Ackroyd et al., 2007; Björk et al., 2011), whereas stronger professions that act as a collective seem to be able to keep a higher level of autonomy (Bejerot et al., 2015).

With this general background, the management structure and logics of Swedish universities has undergone changes, with an increased customer focus (Friberg, 2015), as the governance of higher education takes a more market-like form. The changes in management and administration in Swedish universities are part of a larger trend, where the public administration has changed in Sweden (Hall, 2012), leaning more towards marketisation and corporatisation. This marketisation, with increased emphasis on measurable outcome and benchmarks, is arguably connected to the streamlining of institutions for higher education within the European union. The EU's future strategy suggested by the commission (European Commission, 2022) highlights research and education as key growth engines. To achieve this, it was stated that European universities' performances and international attractiveness must be strengthened, with an increased focus on adaptability, cooperation and a joint "Quality Assurance and Recognition System" (European Commission, 2022: 6). In that regard, the European education systems are being integrated in order to operate in a common market (Allvin and Movitz, 2011; European Commission, 2022), and compete internationally. This places new demands on the higher education institutions to gradually adapt more of a market logic, and act in an arena where new hybrid forms of education systems in the form of pure business universities and cooperatives emerge (Allvin and Movitz, 2011; Mellström, 2012). While this study focuses on a Swedish case, the changes toward increased "managerialism" are not unique for Sweden (Ese, 2019), and the findings in this project might be relevant for

understanding the dynamics in academic organisations in other national contexts, as well as other professional organisations following similar logics.

These changes in managerial philosophy arguably have had an impact on the distribution of administrative work. In the early 1990s, cuts occurred mainly in the administrative functions and more of the everyday administrative tasks were instead transferred to people in the “core business” (see Boström (2011) for a critical discussion of the distinction between core and support). The physicians had to write more notes in journals, the professor entered the students’ grades into the appropriate systems, the police distributed their own internal mail and so on (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020; SOU 2018:38). The main reason given was to ensure efficiency with public finances, in line with dominating ideas from the “megatrend” of new public administration (Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995; SOU 2018:38). Time wise, this occurred quite simultaneously with the computerisation of public administration, (discussed in the previous section and more so in paper 2), making administrative tasks easier to distribute to multiple users as the introduction of new technologies and administrative systems opened up a redistribution of work between academics and administrative staff (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020: 29-30). This is part of the development of the “administrative society” situation where the administrative tasks have been both professionalised – as there are more specialised administrative positions - and at the same time also “amateurised” - everyone does increasingly more administrative work half-way alongside their professional area (Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014). This might lead to a general de-professionalisation of the professional workers, as they have to spend time doing things other than their expert role (Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014).

Simultaneously with the decrease of “everyday administrative support”, there is also an increase in administrators in other parts of the organisations. A “new” type of administrator, highly educated specialists such as communicators, strategists, controllers and managers, enters the organisations (Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017). They have their own professions and strive to manage their job according to their own expertise. That has arguably led to increased administration (Forssell and Westerberg Ivarsson, 2014; Hall, 2012; Hall, 2014) and tensions within organisations, not least regarding the division of labour

(Hasenfeld, 2009; see also Power, 1997). All in all, the administrative staff within Swedish universities have not expanded in proportion during the latest 20 years, but have changed in composition (Agevall and Olofsson, 2020). More of the everyday administration has been decentralised, moved out from central units closer to the end user, and other parts were given a character of support and consultation, such as funding specialists or project managers. That agrees with research showing that different professions in the world of higher education tend to overlap and the boundaries between them are blurred; 'a third space' is beginning to form as an area where academic and other professions are mixed without sharp boundaries between them (Karlsson and Ryttberg, 2016; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017; Whitchurch, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008).

The general descriptions provided above give a broad outline of the formal aspects of changes within administration and academia. As one can notice, the shifting roles and increased tensions are mainly described as a conflict between two dominant parts – the management and the professions. While some agency has been ascribed to the more specialised types of administrative roles (Karlsson and Ryttberg, 2016; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2019), the more general administrative support functions are either overlooked, or viewed as a group that is either reduced, requested, or passively caught in the middle between professions and management.

While the agency of the group is one of the themes in this thesis, the exploration of their collective agency is mainly done in papers 3 and 4, whereas papers 1 and 2 focus on the potential for individual agency.

The shifted focus within NPM towards measuring the outcome of the job, rather than securing the procedures, has in some regards located management further from the everyday performance of work in public organisations. The managerial procedures are increasingly being performed at a distance, taking a reactive character focusing on how various indicators are met in relation to expected outcomes (Røvik, 2008), rather than assigning or directing certain tasks. This focus on outcome rather than processes, is a central part of the NPM doctrines, (Hood, 1991) and in some regards puts management further from the managing of the everyday performance of work, as they govern by setting goals and follow up on the reported outcomes, rather than being directly involved in the performance of work. In Sweden, Røvik (2008:

122) describes this as somewhat of a paradoxical process where we, on one hand could talk about a de-bureaucratisation, with increased opportunities to design one's own work, but on the other hand, there is a bureaucratic return, a re-bureaucratisation, in the form of an increasing emphasis on indirect, impersonal influence through the construction of formalised control systems. This development towards more obscured, but at the same time rigid, managerial systems has brought with it an increased responsibility for the individual employee to make the right choice themselves in order to achieve the desired outcome at work, rather than doing the right thing in accordance with stated job descriptions. Rules and guidelines that are vaguely formulated leave room for individual interpretations, assessments and priorities (Bruhn, 2015: 48) and what are judged as successful work and successful results can be interpreted differently, not infrequently contradictorily, among different stakeholders. This is an important insight, indicating that the tensions between different expectations that are a central theme in this project, and in different ways explored in all of the four papers, might be a general pattern in other settings as well. It indicates improved risks connected to role ambiguity and job enlargement, but also possibilities in terms of job crafting and flexibility for those who can navigate between different stakeholders.

While the general debates concerning the influence of NPM in public organisations is held on an abstract level between two acting partners – professions and management – it is important to notice that, in this case, the university itself is not a uniform organisation, but rather made up of various subgroups and collectives. This is an important aspect to keep in mind when exploring the social dynamics as local customs, traditions and social relationships shape work in the different departments, a theme explored mainly in paper 2, but also in papers 3 and 4. The different disciplines have their own approaches to how research, teaching and examinations are conducted (Becher, 1994; Gerholm and Gerholm, 1992; Neumann et al., 2002), and the implementation of shared processes can be different even within the same organisation. These negotiations, interpretations and positioning are often ignored and underestimated, Neumann et al. (2002) claim. The way in which things will be done, Mouffe (2008) argues, is always a consequence of political processes - of conflicting possible paths and negotiations. That form of everyday politics is constantly going on around us, and the

political game of how to do something does not end with a decision being made or a directive being issued. In these ongoing conflicts and negotiations, the departmental administrator seems to play an active role, which is explored further in the different papers.

The departmental administrators' position as actors in a complex hierarchy, caught between various groups with sometimes colliding interests, needs to be understood with the background of changed functions and expectations on the occupation. This could be seen as part of a broader transformation of female-dominated administrative service occupations, and the external forces of NPM doctrines. At the same time – the impact of NPM in professional organisations also needs to be explored from other perspectives than the dominating groups and recognises the agency of other groups to be fully understood in its consequences.

As mentioned initially, this chapter is providing a background regarding the changes made in the secretarial, later administrative, work related to the occupational group focused in this thesis, as well as providing a broader background regarding the changed relations within the public sector and academia, influenced by NPM doctrines. This background has informed all of the papers. Therefore, while we might learn something regarding this specific job and social relationships in academia by studying the organisation from their point of view, we might also learn something more general by investigating an organisation from this group's position. How this is done in terms of the research process, data generation and analysis is discussed in the next chapter.

5 Methods

This chapter discusses the research design, the different techniques used for data generation and analysis and the role of the researcher. First, some remarks are made regarding the general influences and assumptions that have inspired the methodological approach and design of this study. Thereafter follows a presentation and discussion of the research design and process. This is followed by a presentation of the process of data generation, and methods of data analysis, after which the strengths and limitations of the study is discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion on the role of the researcher.

Firstly, to say something general about the methodological approach in this study, it is to some extent inspired by some foundational insights from institutional ethnography (IE). While IE does not prescribe a rigorous set of methods (Smith, 2006), the main inspiration is regarding the research design and understanding of the researcher's positioning of data generation. One main difference from a more clear-cut IE study would be the focus on texts as carriers of the ruling relations that often play a major part in IE studies, which is influencing, but does not permeate this study. Another difference is the focus of this study to mainly be concerned with the activities and social relationships within one organisation. While the abstracted themes in this project are analysed in relation to external forces such as the influence of NPM doctrines and the gender, these contextual elements are not (with some expectation such as the governmental suggestion regarding computerisation as discussed in paper 2) empirically traced and explored beyond the range of the organisation making up this case. Beyond these remarks, I will now focus on the aspects that have informed this study, rather than pursue a more detailed discussion regarding what label to put on it.

The understanding of the research process as a process of data generation (rather than, for example, data collecting or data gathering), is inspired by debates within feminist research, where the term 'data production' is used to imply that the information "gathered" is at the same time produced in a social process of giving meaning to the social world (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002); a process involving the researcher as well as the participants. I use the term of data generation rather than data production mainly as a stylistic device, as the term generation for

me implies less of a directed or limited activity than the term production, highlighting the generation of data as a continuous ongoing process in any situations where we are exploring the social world (Smith, 1999; Smith, 2004).

The Why question, as in why study this group, has been discussed in relation to previous research earlier in this kappa. However, from an epistemological perspective, I want to highlight the argument that questions raised from the perspective of more marginal groups might make visible perspectives and events overlooked from the perspective of more dominant groups (Harding, 1992; Smith, 2005). The argument that different standpoints generate different experiences and knowledge is well rehearsed within the field of critical feminist studies (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Smith, 1987), arguing that by combining these partial views, we could reach a more complete understanding of our social society. The exploration of this group could therefore make a contribution with this additional perspective.

The explorative approach of the study, and usage of sequential integrated sets of data generation, is influenced by arguments made by Smith (2004) (among others) that concepts, rather than being given their own agency, must be grounded in the experienced social relations within the society. When abstract concepts are taken for granted and used to understand the world, the researchers face the risk of failing to see that the concepts “correspond to the social world because these concepts participate in organising the social order which they want to study“ (Hart and McKinnon, 2010: 1048). The starting point for investigation therefore needs to be in the everyday life, and with people’s experiences (Smith, 2005: 49). While the study acknowledge Smith’s (Smith, 2005) warning that a reliance on predetermined abstract concepts might be less helpful in finding out new aspects of what is going on, as they are also dictating what we are going to find and obscures those experiences that do not fit into the conceptual frameworks (Smith, 2005: 50), the findings and concepts presented in the different papers, as well as in this kappa, are related to ongoing debates and theoretical frameworks, as displayed in previous chapters. While exploration and discovery are central to the research project, we cannot avoid preconceptions, nor the usage of concepts for analysis and engagement

with the existing debates, to also check the relevancy of different conceptualisations related to what we learn in our explorations (Smith, 2005: 50).

What we have learned in terms of individual experiences and narratives must also be located in its context. The social, Smith argues (drawing on Mead (1934), Garfinkel (1984) and Marx (Smith, 2004) is nothing separated from the agent, neither is the society distinct apart from the individual. Rather, they are a co-construct. The social structure builds on the coordination of people's activities, and those activities are performed in a dialog with the past as well as other actors.

the social might be conceived as an ongoing historical process in which people's doings are caught up and responsive to what others are doing; what they are doing is responsive to and given by what has been going on (Smith, 2005: 65)

We respond to what we perceive as the social system, and in doing so, recreate the same system. The social is the co-ordination of people's activities, and the "co-ordinating of people's doings is seen as an ongoing and active process" (Smith, 2005: 64). As the individuals experience and reconstruction of social norms and relations in that regard draws on its spatial and historical context and setting, the specific circumstances, such as the gendered nature of the occupation, the historical development of the secretarial role and the context of new public management, are presented in a separate chapter (4) and given a prominent position in this project.

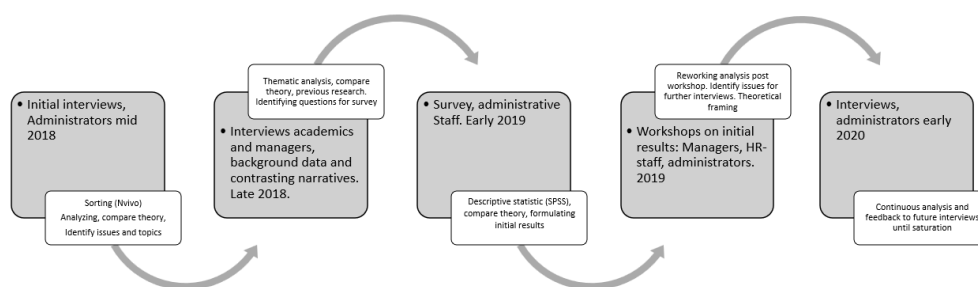
Another central point being made by Smith (2004; 2005) is that the individual is not facing society nor trying to make sense of the surrounding world in solitude. Our understanding of the world is a mutual activity amongst we who share the experiences of reality (Hart and McKinnon, 2010). This idea of the world as a mutual activity of shared experience gives, I think, a strong argument of mixing methods in these kinds of endeavours, as the answers we are seeking are twofold - what are the experiences and to what extent are they shared – meaning we need both narratives and numbers. How the different methods were integrated into the research design is now presented.

5.1 Research design

This thesis is based on a case study, in terms of an intensive study of a single setting (Gerring, 2004; Hamel et al., 1993) set in a Swedish

university, using a sequential connecting integration of mixed methods (Mason, 2002; Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016) to explore the experience of work from the perspective of departmental administrators. The data generation has been done in different stages: initial explorative interviews were followed by a questionnaire, which then was followed by workshops and another set of interviews. In total, the data consists of 13 interviews with administrators; 2 interviews with academics; 2 interviews with people in managerial positions; a survey among administrative staff (total survey, 57 percent response rate); workshops with a total of 40 administrators; a group discussion with 7 managers and a group discussion with 11 HR personnel. All names used in this kappa and the research papers are made up in order to keep anonymity, and the project as a whole has undergone ethical review.

Figure 1. Illustration of the research process. (Published in Regin (2022).)



The study has an explorative approach, in terms of a “broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximise the discovery of generalisations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life” (Stebbins, 2001: 3). An explorative approach is helpful when we don’t have that much prior knowledge about the phenomena we wish to investigate, or any clear hypothesis to test (Hjerm et al., 2014), but at the same time have reason to believe that the target for the exploration could generate relevant data (Stebbins, 2001). When doing explorative research, it is important that the researcher is flexible in terms of what data is generated, and how that is valued, and keeps an open mind regarding from where this data might be generated (Köhler et al., 2023; Stebbins, 2001). In this study, that is achieved in the deployment of sequential steps of data

generation, where the findings in one stage inform the design of the next, which is further elaborated on throughout this chapter. The usage of an explorative approach in this study ties in to the epistemological position considering the structuring of the social as an ongoing process and the idea of taking the standpoint of a group on the periphery of the actors formulating the dominating narratives as a point of departure, to explore the social dynamics as experienced from their position (Smith, 1987), as discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

As mentioned, this project is based in a case study set in a single organisation. The case study design is commonly used within social science, but perhaps not as often reflected upon (Gerring, 2004; Ragin and Becker, 1992). Furthermore, the label case study might be a bit vague, since one could argue that every study is a case study, as they analyse phenomenon specific to a time and a place (Ragin and Becker, 1992: 3). To be more specific, this project is a case study in terms of a “intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units”(Gerring, 2004: 342), even though this definition rather illustrates an ideal case, than a set of methods with a fixed set of rules (Gerring, 2004). Case studies are often used to explore areas or subjects that have not been subject to much research (Hamel et al., 1993), as the focus on a single case gives an opportunity to explore that case in greater depth (Gerring, 2004). This suggests a case study design a fruitful approach in this project.

While this case is specific, its implications might be more general. The defining features of this case – the influence of new public management doctrines and gendered expectations, the changed role of administrators and administrative work and the tensions between management and professions – could be found in other professional organisations, so the findings in this case could bring additional understanding of a larger class of similar units.

The setting of this case consists of one Swedish mid-sized university, located in a rural area hosting about 10 000 – 15 000 students and about 1200 employees. The university is quite young compared to the “traditional” institutions for higher education (Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm and Gothenburg), and characterised by an “academic instrumentalism” rather than an “academic traditionalism”, meaning it is more prone to line management, being output-orientated and less protective of collegial decision-making processes (Bremer, 2015). This

organisation is explored from the experiences of the main group in this case – the department administrators. The group of departmental administrators is defined via their formal affiliation in the organisation, as employed by one of the administrative departments, whose role is to provide general support to the academic departments. This differs from the centralised administrative units such as IT, HR or Finances, who provide support in more specific areas, or the various positions such as research assistants, who in some cases provide general support, but are employed in the different academic departments.

The exploration of this case is, as introduced earlier in this chapter, informed by the idea from institutional ethnography of starting off in the everyday experiences of the group in focus (Smith, 2005; Smith, 2006). Rather than being firmly decided on the research process at the start of the project, the issue of which techniques for data generation need to be deployed next has been raised in different steps along the way. That resonates well with a mixed methods case study design, where the different data generating techniques are used sequentially and are connected (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016). The integration of mixed methods can be used to capture different aspects of a phenomenon (Mason, 2002), in order to achieve a more complete understanding (Köhler et al., 2023). By carrying out the data generation in several steps with different methods, the credibility of the results can increase (Nowell et al., 2017) - it can also lead to an opportunity for both depth and breadth in the material (Mason, 2002: 27). The different methods must, however, be combined and used strategically, with an idea of what this integration is meant to provide, rather than being put together in an ad hoc way (Mason, 2002). The usage of mixed methods can be done in different ways in terms of timing and integration – in which order the different methods are used and to what degree the data generated in one stage influences the next step. The different data generating methods could be used concurrently or sequentially, and the methods could be combined or connected (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016). When used concurrently, the data generation with different methods occurs separately from one another, and the results are then compared. When used sequentially, one set of data generation is followed by another in different steps. When they are combined, the results from the different data generating techniques are analysed and understood together. In a connecting approach, the data generated in a

first phase is used to design the data generation in the next step (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016). Informed by those insights, the different methods in this case study have been used sequentially, with a connecting approach as the design of each set of questions – in interviews and surveys – has been constructed based on the outcome of the previous step. This method of structuring the research process and data generation goes in line with the foundational idea within institutional ethnography of mapping the social organisation one step at the time, where the discoveries in the first steps inform which step to take next (Smith, 1987; Smith, 2005).

5.2 The process of data generation

The first step in this research project was to conduct a few (four) open-ended interviews with department administrators, focusing on their role in the organisation and their workplace relations to different actors such as academics, managers, students and other administrators. Borrowing the language of IE, this was a first mapping exercise in order to get a view of their experienced close surroundings in the organisational terrain, and get a first glimpse of possible trails to follow (Smith, 2006). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The respondents were selected to differ from each other in terms of employment time, location and background within the organisation in order to provide various experiences, which is a good praxis in explorative research (Mason, 2002). The questions were of an open nature to try to capture the respondents' experiences (Arvidson and Rosengren, 2002). This is informed by the explorative approach (Stebbins, 2001) taken in this project, in line with the idea of construction concepts as experienced at the site of exploration (Smith, 2005).

A set of themes were generated by these interviews, such as the vagueness of the job, the lack of formal descriptions of tasks and responsibilities and the seemingly ongoing negotiations with other administrators, academics and managers regarding what to do and how to do it. These themes could be considered the result of a first cycle of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016), later on refined and recoded during the continuous research process. These codes were also combined with memos used to develop further lines of inquiry. The usage of memos (Saldaña, 2016) is an effective way of keeping track of initial ideas and

lines of thought emerging during the different stages of the process of analysis.

The next step was to follow the identified trails and themes and get the views of other actors in the organisation - that was at least the idea behind the interviews conducted with academics (two) and managers (two), combined with a close reading of organisation charts, policies, evaluations and process-guides. This exploration of different views of the same phenomenon within the same case – an integration of different sources - is a technique of methodological triangulation (Mason, 2002), that could be useful to get a further understanding of a phenomenon. At this stage of the case study, the integration of sources was used to try to capture the different meanings and impressions of the seeming vagueness of the internal roles, to get a deeper understanding of the relations between different actors within the organisation. The interviews with the academics strengthened the impressions of tensions and ongoing negotiations regarding the division of labour at workplace level, prioritisation of tasks and consideration of interests, as something not just experienced by the department administrators that I happened to interview first, but as something perhaps spread in the organisation. One source of these tensions could be traced to a reorganisation that changed the organisational affiliation of the administrators from the academic departments to an independent administrative department. I would then argue that the trails of the vagueness of the job, the lack of formal descriptions of tasks and responsibilities and the seemingly ongoing negotiations experienced by the first four department administrators interviewed, could be traced to decisions made in the organisation, and experienced by others as well.

The next step in this mapping exercise was to figure out if this might be something familiar to a larger group in the organisation, or just a highly local phenomenon among those I had initially talked to. This required a new set of data generation. While the open-ended qualitative interviews generated insights into the deeper experiences of work and social relationships, they could not give an indication of how widespread the experiences of tensions, and sometimes strained relationships to other actors in the organisation were. Qualitative interviews give the participants increased opportunities to express themselves, and voice other topics than those predetermined in, for example, a quantitative survey. However, they are also limited in terms of reach, as they often sacrifice

scope to gain details (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). Therefore, to move further in the exploration of the social relationships in the organisation that makes this case, my next step was to construct a survey sent to all department administrators in the organisation (and to all other kinds of administrative staff in the organisation as well). The idea was not to use the survey as a final stage of testing of whether the themes identified in the initial interview were generalisable to a wider population or not, but as a part of the mapping exercise (Smith, 1987) of experiences within the organisation constituting this case to explore which experiences seems to be shared.

Traditionally, there might have been, and perhaps still is, some hesitancy within social sciences regarding combining different types of methods (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008), as the qualitative and quantitative research approaches have been argued to “represent very different sets of intellectual habits and frame of mind” (McCracken and McCracken, 1988: 17). Here it is important, I think, to distinguish between data generating techniques and research approaches, while at the same time acknowledging that these different methods generate different types of data. While it is often argued, and rightfully so I think, that all data or knowledge we generate about this world or reality is socially constructed and mediated (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Garfinkel, 1984; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992; Mansfield, 2000; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2004), different types of data could still provide us with different pieces of a puzzle exploring the shared and dominating images of reality. As we are facing society collectively and are trying to make sense of the surrounding world in concert (Hart and McKinnon, 2010), the understanding of the world is a mutual activity amongst we who share the experiences of reality. We must therefore also develop tools and research strategies to capture both the variations and deeper experiences, as well as be able to map what we could refer to as shared experiences.

It might come across as problematic, in terms of ontological or epistemological issues, to combine different kinds of data-generating techniques, or methods, in the same study as there might be assumptions of “positivistic”, “constructivist” or “reflexive” positioning tied to different methods - in this study the methods are used within the same epistemological framework. While it sometimes is the case that different methods correspond to different ontological assumptions, it is not

anything inherent in the methods making it so (Burawoy, 2009; Mason, 2002; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Quantitative data, for example, does not require a positivist methodology, nor does an empiricist epistemology by default exclude the use of interviews (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Different methods do, however, generate different types of data (Mason, 2002) and the assumptions or epistemological position taken by the researcher influences how those techniques are deployed and how the data generated by the different techniques is read and interpreted.

So, rather than further rehearse those debates, perhaps the most important questions to address would be – what data am I generating here? How is that data read and interpreted? All data generated by interview or survey is regarded here as socially-mediated statements of people's experiences, constructed in the social setting of the data-generating situation, while not directly generalisable or assuming that other individuals in other organisations would have the same experiences. The data generated in the survey were treated as fragmented statements of people's experiences. While in general the answers given in the survey were more shorthanded and directed by the researcher than answers given in qualitative interviews, they are treated as having the same epistemological status as socially-mediated statements of experiences and interpretations of the ongoing coordination and reconstruction of a social order, in part making up the social organisation of society (Smith, 1999; Smith, 2004; Smith, 2005). To compensate for some of the necessary fragmentation and researcher-forced options of possible questions and answers that are one of the features of a survey (Ejlertsson, 2005), there was plenty of space and opportunities for free text comments connected to the different multiple-choice questions in this digital survey.

In connecting different methods for data generation, one could achieve a greater depth and a broader understanding of the subject of exploration (Mason, 2002). At the same time, the combination or triangulation of methods must be done with a sensitivity regarding how the different types of data generated relate to each other (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), and what conclusions that could be drawn from this triangulated data (Mason, 2002).

The design and focus of each data generation in this project was connected to the previous steps, which is argued as being a tried and tested

way of integrating mixed methods (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016). In the initial interviews, some topics of vagueness and tensions had been generated. In the following interviews with managers and academics, and the reading of policy documents and internal evaluations, these tensions and vagueness seemed to be experienced from other positions in the organisation, as well as having a formal source in the design of the organisation – in other words, it seemed to be a part of the organisational setting (Smith, 2005; Smith, 2006). Therefore, the ambition with the next step was to explore how this aspect of the institutional setting came across for more actors in similar positions in the organisation. The questionnaire was constructed to explore these issues in this specific organisation as a part of the intensive study of this discrete case (Gerring, 2004). It contained a range of questions of different types – fixed answers, scales and a range of free text questions and boxes to give free text comments as a supplement to the scales and fixed answer questions, making it more of a mixed methods questionnaire than a fully quantitative or qualitative survey (Braun et al., 2021). The questionnaire was sent to all employees within the administrative departments at the university (a total of 397 people). The questionnaire was constructed and distributed via an on-line platform, and was approved as meeting the standards of data security by the ethical committee that approved the project as a whole. The respondents were kept anonymous, as the response lists and email addresses were codified by the platform, out of reach from the researcher. The analysis of response pattern in term of age, gender and departments were made on the basis of self-reported data in the survey, and compared to register data over all employees.

For reasons of demarcation, respondents who fell outside the category of "departmental administrators" – that is, someone in an administrative position, but employed outside of one of the general administrative departments (such as IT, finances, HR) - were filtered out leaving 101 people. Of these, 57 people answered the survey, which gives a response rate of 57 percent. There were no visible patterns among the non-respondents. While this survey is not used to draw any conclusions of a population outside of the sample, as the sample (department administrators in this specific organisation) makes up the whole population (department administrators in this specific organisation), there is no issues of generalisability related to response rate to be concerned

about.¹ The ambition with the survey was to gather the different experiences of coordination and organising in this institutional setting (Smith, 2005: 122) and how that shapes the understandings and actions from the perspective of my group of participants, as a way to figure out how these experiences were connected (ibid:143).

While numbers hardly speak for themselves, but are the subject of interpretation by the researcher (Mason, 2002), the numeric data from the survey as well as the, quite rich, qualitative data in terms of free text comments were used as the basis for a reflexive dialog with different groups of participants in an attempt to give collective meanings, and different interpretations, of what hid behind the numeric data from the survey. These kinds of reflexive dialogues are a way of trying to find out how people, in this case the different participants in this study, are making sense of and coordinating their understanding of their institutional setting - in this case the organisation – in chorus with other actors (Smith, 2005). Therefore, the next step of exploring the dynamics in this case, was to have a dialog regarding some of the findings in the study with other actors. This step is inspired by the idea of the co-constructing of data as an ongoing process between researcher and participant (Acker et al., 1983), but here it is used to a lower degree without, for example, striving to reach a consensus of interpretations, or removing the accountability for analysis and interpretations from the researcher, which otherwise might create problems regarding ethics, reliability and transparency (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

Initial results from the survey were then presented to various groups in the organisation – managers, HR-staff and department administrators. By presenting the data to actors involved in the institutional setting, potential biases in the analyses or premature conclusions could be made visible (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). This was one way of constructing reflexivity as a part of the research process, which is always important when doing thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) (The usage of thematic analysis is to be discussed a bit later on in this

¹ While there is no claims to make any generalisation outside of this case, it might however be worth mentioning that a response rate at 57 % is generally considered as providing reliable data to generalise from (Baruch and Holtom, 2008), why in this case it could be argued provides an ample picture of this specific organisation.

chapter). Besides being a structured device to facilitate reflexivity, these group discussions functioned as a way to get different inputs and reflections on what might be behind the numbers and trends generated in the data. These occasions were in themselves generating new data and turned out to be a great source for new perspectives and lines of enquiries to follow, not least regarding the effects of a previous reorganisation and different aspects of the vague job descriptions. This kind of ongoing generation of data in dialogues with different participants is the central aspect of “mapping the social relations” as experienced in different institutional settings everyday life (Smith, 1987; Smith, 2005), where the role of the researcher is also to connect these local mappings to the overall structures coordinating and constituting society as a social organisation; or, put differently, to make the extension of the case from the local to the general (Burawoy, 2009).

The final step in this explorative journey was then to get back to individuals, using the survey and the reflections on the outcome as a guide to talk about their experience of work in terms of tasks, relations and changes. The questionnaire and focus groups were followed up with nine additional hour-long semi-structured interviews with departmental administrators. The respondents were strategically selected according to the same template as in the four initial interviews - a staff list was used to find and approach participants with a range of experiences, such as employment time and placement within different departments. A strategic selection of participants is used to achieve a relevant range of experiences, context and backgrounds of the participants related to the phenomena one wishes to study (Mason, 2002). This aim to achieve a variation of different participants is also in line with the idea that the social structures are experienced differently due to one's social position (Smith, 1987). The departmental administrators interviewed in this study have various backgrounds and experiences. Age wise, they span from late 20s to the 60s, and the group is heavily female-dominated - more so in the departments for social sciences (90+ percent) than within science and technology (70+ percent). The gendered pattern is similar among the academic staff, with a female majority within the social sciences and a male majority in the science and technology departments. The departmental administrators' time of employment ranges from a few years to 20+ years. They have various backgrounds and experiences from outside of the university, as

well as from other positions within the university, providing a range of contextual backgrounds to their experiences from this job.

The final set of interviews followed similar themes to one another, and were based in the same interview guide. However, as semi-structured open-ended interviews, the focus of the different interviews altered, and the interview guide was updated between the different interviews to capture additional aspects or themes that emerged in the interviews. This way of actively working and reworking the interview guide in-between interviews is common practice in explorative qualitative research (Mason, 2002).

Qualitative interviews could be performed in different ways. A more open-ended interview, perhaps more in terms of an “conversation with a purpose” (Mason, 2002), is useful when we have little knowledge of a phenomenon (Arvidson and Rosengren, 2002). This gives the participant a lot of space to express their views and experiences in a broad way. These kinds of interviews were conducted in the initial stages of this research process. The follow-up interviews were based on patterns identified and explored in the initial interviews, survey and workshops, making them, in some regards, more focused on different types of experiences. For example, a theme in the initial interviews was the difficulties of knowing what was included in the job. This inspired a question in the survey regarding how large an amount of their job tasks that were given to them by their manager (quite a low amount), which also gave a couple of free text comments in the survey that indicated that their manager had little to do with their everyday work. That theme then inspired further questions in the interviews regarding their relations to their manager, organisational affiliation and expectations from others of what their job should consist. Even though the follow-up interviews were informed by the previous steps of data generation, they were rather inductive than deductive as they were not aiming to test or verify theoretically-informed hypotheses or assumptions. However, the clear-cut distinctions and descriptions of a research process being either inductive or deductive is arguably not reflecting the messy back and forth between data and theory in the research process (Karlsson and Bergman, 2016), but is to some degree a construction in the reporting process.

5.3 Methods of data analysis

The qualitative data in this study has been coded with the inspiration from thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2011). A code in this study is understood as a “researcher-generated product that symbolises or ‘translates’ data” (Saldaña, 2016: 4), in line with the understanding of the research process as a data-generating process (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). The usage of thematic analysis for coding the qualitative data is suitable as it is a flexible and well-established practice, and is possible to use across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In other words, there are no epistemological assumptions embedded in the techniques of thematic analysis that collide with the ontological or epistemological assumptions informing this study. As thematic analysis is a broad label given various meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the process of coding is here presented in a bit more detail, linking to different arguments made on how to make a solid thematic coding. All interview data has been manually transcribed by the author. To manually transcribe the data is a good way to familiarise oneself with the data, as a first step of the analytical process (Kowal and O’Connell, 2014). The initial coding of the interviews were made manually as a part of familiarisation with the data and the coding process (Saldaña, 2016); in later stages the coding was made in NVIVO.

The coding, however, was not initiated before the transcription and one initial reading of the interview were done, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). At the same time, the analysis of the data material in practice started already during the first interview as, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue, analysis and interpretations occur throughout the whole research process. These stages of initial interpretations are hard to avoid as we don’t engage with our generated data, or in fact anything else, without any sort of pre-understanding (Smith, 2005), as the researcher is also embedded in the same social structures and reality that is to be explored. In a similar manner, the coding of the first interview sets preconditions and influences the coding of the following interview (Saldaña, 2016), where there is a need to loop back to additional rounds of coding and recoding during the process. These cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016) in this project were undertaken repeatedly in between the different stages of data generation, as well as in the

development of the different conceptual lenses deployed in the different papers.

The coding of the interviews were closer to a inductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006), than a theoretical or conceptual driven coding (Saldaña, 2016), as there were no predetermined conceptual frameworks (Saldaña, 2016) that the data was coded in relation to, besides the idea that this was a good case to study workplace relations in an transforming sector. This type of coding, decided by an “emergent conceptual framework” (Saldaña, 2016: 71), resonates with the idea of constructing concepts from the point of experiences (Smith, 2004). From the initial interviews, themes, such as colliding expectations and the vagueness of the job, were generated and constructed along the way. Rather than describe them as emerging themes, they are the creation of the researcher in a couple of ways (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The patterns are identified and treated as a patterns by the researcher. It is also the decision of the researcher that makes them into “themes” (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). Besides that, as this study is designed as a multi-stage data generation, the decisions regarding what is a theme and what is not in the analytical process in between each step, influences what themes are to be pursued and identified in the following steps. In that regard, the analytical process of coding is also informing the different stages of data generation (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). This impact of the researcher cannot be avoided, as we as researchers investigating social relations operate on the same level of reality as we are to explore and our decisions and conceptualisations, therefore, are a part in constructing the same social reality (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Smith, 2005). The decisions made by the researcher regarding data generation and coding therefore influence the findings in this study, an issue that is further discussed a little later in this text. The quantitative data was mainly analysed on a descriptive level (Djurfeldt et al., 2018), using SPSS to provide data on the frequency of experience regarding, for example, conflicting demands, social relationships and interactions at workplace level, the experience of belongings, where the requests for different tasks come from and the level of discretion to plan and conduct the job. Cross-table comparisons (Djurfeldt et al., 2018) were used to identify potential patterns of experience regarding age, time spent in the organisation and the influence of the academic faculties the administrators were located in. These

cross-table comparisons were mainly used in paper 2, indicating a difference between those administrators located in a male-dominated versus female-dominated faculty, and different experiences between senior and more recently employed administrators regarding how they were approached by their academic colleagues. As there was a complete overlap between the population and the sample – the findings in the survey are not generalised to any other group besides those who received the survey – no tests of significance for potential generalisation have been made.

The survey also provided qualitative data in terms of free text comments. As mentioned earlier, surveys as a technique could be used to generate qualitative as well as quantitative data (Braun et al., 2021). The survey developed in this case study is a hybrid (Braun et al., 2021), rather than purely qualitative or quantitative in terms of the type of data that is generated. The qualitative data in the survey were used to provide insights into potential interpretations and themes in the quantitative data, but also coded as qualitative statements in themselves (Braun et al., 2021). Analysed as independent qualitative statements, the qualitative data from the survey were adding to the identified themes in the project, partly in informing the analysis as well as the following steps in the research process.

The different group discussions were not recorded and therefore not transcribed nor coded to a similar level of detail as the individual interviews. They were instead recorded as fieldnotes and concluding remarks, where the different topics of discussion were fed into the more general framework of interpretation and analysis. The documents studied – organisational charts, descriptions of formal processes and the division of labour, the written basis of the decisions behind reorganisations and internal evaluations performed after these reorganisations - were not really analysed in any methodological sense, but rather used as sources of data, that contributed to my general interpretation of events in the organisation.

5.4 Strengths and limitations

The research design of a case study comes with its strengths and limitations. While argued by Ragin and Becker (1992) that almost every study could be considered a case study, as the phenomena studied are located in time and space, making it a case that is studied, there are

limitations of this kind of intensive case study in a single setting (Gerring, 2004). One limitation is the difficulty to know to what extent the findings in this case would translate to other settings (Bennett, 2004: 5), and more precisely what in the settings that might influence the transferability. A study over several cases could provide a greater range of observations, giving an idea of the representativeness of the themes investigated (Gerring, 2004). On the other hand, the intensive focus on one case provides opportunities for additional observations or data generating occasions of that case, making the findings arguably richer and more robust (Gerring, 2004). The issue of whether using a case study or not, is not so much about if it is good or bad to use case studies, but when it is preferable to use them, and when other designs are more suitable (Gerring, 2004). For an explorative study on a group where not that much is known, with the intention to trace the everyday experiences of work in an institutional setting (Smith, 2005), it is arguably a solid choice (Gerring, 2004; Hamel et al., 1993).

Regarding the methods of data generation in themselves, there are strengths and weaknesses of the methods used in this study, which have been discussed throughout this chapter. While the qualitative interviews could provide a greater access to more elaborate accounts of experiences, the potential to clarify and grasp nuances of meaning and capture contradictions and ambiguities, they offer limited means of generalisation (Mason, 2002; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Silverman and Marvasti, 2008), and do not tell us what aspects of the experiences that seem to be shared among others in the ongoing coordination of our social society (Hart and McKinnon, 2010).

Quantitative methods, on the other hand, provide a wider range of experiences, but lack the depth and flexibility to capture themes and aspects identified during the process of data generation. Some of these shortcomings of each technique have, hopefully, been compensated for by the combination of methods and the sequential connection of them (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016), as a combination of methods provides both depth and a broader range (Mason, 2002; Silverman and Marvasti, 2008), and the use of mixed methods in case studies gives opportunities to address broad research questions (Guetterman and Fetters, 2018) commonly used in explorative studies such as this. While the mixed methods have their limitations in neither providing the depth that a fully qualitative study might provide, nor the

generalisability a quantitative study would bring, the balance of depth and range provided by using a mix of methods in this setting, is arguably preferable in an explorative intensive case study.

While this sequential connection provides an opportunity to explore identified patterns in depth, while also keeping some track of its spread, it might also create a trial blindness as some avenues are explored, whereas other potential themes or trails are overlooked or missed. At the same time, scientific research is arguably always limited to provide a partial knowledge rather than a complete picture of all aspect of a given event or phenomena (Haraway, 1988; Smith, 1987). That is a limitation of this study – one could assume that there are a lot of other potential avenues that would be interesting to investigate, but that now remain unrecognised and beyond the scope of this study. A perhaps more optimistic way of thinking about this might be to consider these alternative potential topics for further research, rather than limitations and missed opportunities. Some of these potential themes, such as stress caused by role ambiguity, of alternative designs or usage of observations or diaries, have been actively put to one side in favour of the avenues and designs selected and motivated above. Other aspects or potentials have probably never been realised or considered due to the pre-understanding research interests and trial blindness of the researcher in this project. The influence of the researcher might arguably start with the first embryo of an idea for a research project (Harding, 1992), but does not stop there, which is now further discussed.

5.5 The role of the researcher and reflexive approach

As discussed in relation to the usage of surveys earlier in this chapter, the types of questions we ask and in which way we ask them, influences the answers we get and what data is generated. Without doubt, my previous experiences from different roles and encounters within academia set some ideas in my head as where to begin – something that is discussed further on in this chapter. Besides these broader implications, our ways of generating data – what actual questions we are posting in interviews or surveys influences what data we get, enabling some analysis, while putting limitations to others. That is as discussed previously the case with the more fragmented and limited statements provided in

a survey; however, these types of restrictions exist also in the qualitative interviews.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the generation of data is a process involving researcher and the “subject for research”. The researcher cannot step outside of the social reality we are to explore (Smith, 2004), neither can the person we talk to in the interview ignore the fact that there is another human being there asking them questions (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). The researcher is an active participant in generating the data that are analysed, and in analysing and reporting data on the social organisation of society and also plays a part in reconstructing the same social organisation (Smith, 2005; Smith, 2006). The researcher must therefore critically reflect on their own presence in the research process (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

While the qualitative interview – open, semi structured or fully structured and uniform – provides more freedom for the interviewed to express themselves than a multiple-choice check box in a survey, there are still limitations. The researcher initiates the conversation and agenda, and steers the conversation with questions and follow-ups. As a social interaction, the researcher is probably in most cases more familiar, and comfortable, with the interview situation, having a greater experience of the format. These potential imbalances might create limitations regarding what the participants feel is relevant or appropriate to share. Other social conventions of what is appropriate and reasonable to say and do also influence what is brought up and in what way. Likewise, all the conscious and unconscious responses from the researcher regarding what the interviewee tells us, encourages them to follow some trails and ignore others. In that regard, the experienced anonymity of a survey might provide less socially censored responses and the limitations of the data generated in a survey is in a way easier to see and handle, as opposed to the vaguer influence the researcher has on the data generated in a qualitative interview. These kinds of shortcomings are to some extent handled by using an integrated mix of methods and additionally to have group discussions about the topics, creating space to generate shared and differentiated understandings where the researcher plays a less dominating role in the process. While these are problems connected to all types of data generation and research, it is important to acknowledge and make this visible as it

influences what data is generated and how that data is analysed. Regarding the interviews, this was handled in different ways.

With some exceptions, each interview was transcribed before the next was undertaken. This provided an opportunity to make an initial analysis of the researcher's – my – role in the interview, to get insights of what to pay more attention to, as well as an opportunity to adjust the questions and structures for the next interview. The interviews were started with broad, open questions, such as "Tell me about your job", "How did you end up here", "What does a normal day of work look like", in order to not immediately restrict the conversations or set them on a track decided by my pre-understandings. The interviews have then been steered towards the different lines of inquiries that are central in the project. The questions raised in the survey were tested and discussed with people in different positions - academics and administrators - to make visible premature assumptions or any bias connected to the researcher's pre-understandings. The participant has been given influence over the time and location of the interviews in order to reduce power asymmetries regarding familiarity with the setting (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002)

Besides the influence the presence of the researcher has in the actual data generating situations, the researcher never enters the field of exploration as a blank page (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Smith, 1987), and in an interactive data collection, such as interviews, the phase of analysing data is rarely entered into without initial ideas (Nowell et al., 2017). Returning for a moment back to the opening lines of this thesis, it is clear that this project was initiated by a curiosity based in experiences from an academic organisation. Already at this stage, I had some ideas of what to look for, and some assumptions of what I might find. Since the time of that first encounter, until the current situation when this thesis is being written, I have experienced academia in different roles - as a student, temporary teacher, research assistant, administrator and currently as a postgraduate researcher. The initial ideas and my perception of the departmental administrators' position as exposed and a little trapped between different authorities, has become more nuanced and complex from these different experiences, and has been altered by the findings in this thesis. Without running ahead of the concluding discussion, the room for agency

within the administrator's role – as individuals as well as collectives – is probably what has altered my views the most.

Returning to the methodological implications of this, it is important to recognise and handle these pre-understandings in a transparent and conscious way. As the researcher in this case has experiences from different positions in an academic setting, the need for visibility and transparency that are always central to the use of thematic analyses (Nowell et al., 2017) becomes crucial, increasing the demand for vigilance and transparency to make any bias visible, as well as manufactured distance and reflexivity on behalf of the researchers to limit the risk of bias. As mentioned in relation to the process of data generation and analysis earlier in this chapter, there have been instances for reflection during the different stage of data generation, and in the processes of developing the survey and interviews. By analysing the data after each step of the data generation and then discussing those analyses in each step, while also interacting with the participants in form of interviews, survey, focus groups and workshops, a reflexive approach has been built into the process of analysis, reducing the risk of potential bias. These interactions share some similarities with the methodological approaches that design the data generation and interpretations as a shared process between researcher and participants, leading to reciprocal inputs and agreed conclusions of interpretations (Acker et al., 1983). In this project, however, the position is taken that it is the researcher who is responsible for the analysis and interpretations made, while the recurring interaction and engagement with participants in the process of data generation has been a way of also being transparent and accountable for the data generation, interpretations and analysis during the whole process (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

As a part of the reflexive process, each of the papers has been presented for its intended public – the academic community – at internal seminars and research conferences during different stages of development. This is a part of vetting unstrengthened claims, and making one's analysis open for challenge and debate to improve the transparency and accountability of the researcher (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

At the same time, a pre-understanding of the research topic can be helpful in guiding what to ask about and what to follow up (Corbin and Strauss, 2008:80). The author's personal experience from different positions within an academic organisation has been helpful in designing

the study and the line of questions. Being familiar with some of the more technical language regarding digital systems, processes, names of different units and job titles, has been helpful in formulating follow-up questions and following lines of reasoning in the interviews. The experience of talking in the same terms with someone who at least, to some degree, shares similar experiences from work with oneself might create a sense of similarity between the researcher and participants that creates a more comfortable and trustful atmosphere, leading to a richer or more honest interview (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). For this specific case, my own experiences from different positions within an academic organisation – which the interviewees were informed about when asked to participate – may have lowered some bars in terms of how things are talked about (but also probably raised others). We, as humans and researchers, always have a pre-understanding of any given situation. While this calls for reflexivity and transparency, perhaps the researcher's experience from a range of roles within an academic organisation might be considered somewhat of a favourable case for this study.

This chapter has discussed epistemological and ontological assumptions, and how these assumptions, combined with the methodological praxis and considerations, have influenced the design and performance of this study. It is now time to connect the results of those processes of data generation and analysis with the theoretical and contextual frameworks presented in chapters 3 and 4, to provide some answers related to the questions introduced in chapter 1. Hopefully, at least, that is what is achieved in the last chapter of this thesis which now follows.

6 Findings and conclusions

The broad aim of the thesis was to fill a gap in research by taking the point of departure from an often-overlooked group and to explore their relation to different actors within an organisation, in the context of new public management doctrines and gender. The more precise aim was to explore how the organisational dynamics, in this case the relationships between groups, are experienced related to changes to the organisational structure and internal processes of work, from the perspective of the departmental administrators. This concluding chapter firstly addresses the research questions, and thereafter provides an overview of the findings in the individual papers, connecting them to the more general finding of the indeterminate position in-between, and the themes of tensions, agency, risks and possibilities that are identified in this thesis as a whole. These themes are thereafter discussed in relation to the context of the study in terms of the influence of NPM and gender. The chapter then concludes in a discussion of the benefits and limitations of this study, and some ideas for further research departing from where this study ends.

6.1 Research questions and findings related to the papers

The central issue for this concluding chapter to address could simply enough be formulated as – what did I find in this explorative study, and what to make of it? To start from the beginning, the research questions presented in chapter 1 were:

- How does the departmental administrators' position in the organisation influence their relation to other occupational groups in the organisation?
- Has the changed process of work regarding administration had any influence on the relations to other occupational groups in the organisation, and if so, in which ways?

The direct answer to the research questions would be that the position of the individual administrators is not uniform at a workplace level, but depending on their local context, they are subject to alterations due to changes in the internal work processes. Overall, the position is indeterminate and topic for different expectations and interpretations. In terms of to whom to show loyalty, how technology is implemented and

affecting the job, where one belongs in the organisation and to whom to make oneself visible to be recognised, is influenced by different actors and power centres in the organisation, which the administrators often seem to be in-between. This influences their relations both to other occupational groups in the organisation, and also to one another within the administrative group. It is not just as individual actors in between established groups of academics or management, but also as an emerging group in themselves who are arguably more distant from the academics compared to traditionally; however perhaps not closer to management, but rather themselves in an independent site of belonging (as discussed in paper 3.) The theorisation of these dynamics between a multitude of actors and sites in an organisation is one contribution of this thesis.

The changed processes of work, both as affected by the implementation of new technology (as discussed in paper 2 and to some extent in paper 4) and changes in the organisational structure (as discussed in paper 3), have an influence over the relations to other occupational groups. The departmental administrators' indeterminate position in-between, reinforced by the vague or lacking job descriptions (as discussed in chapter 2) creates both tensions as well as increased room for agency regarding the division of labour between the different actors. This position and changed process of work also needs to be understood in the context of the administrative role as carrying gendered expectations connected to the historical role of secretaries as well as located within an organisation influenced by new public management - these aspects are discussed further on in this chapter. First there follows a discussion on how the research questions are connected and addressed in the individual papers.

The findings in the individual papers, as presented in chapter 2, are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Summarised findings in the research papers

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3	Paper 4
Purpose	Exploring connections between the notion of time and loyalties	Exploring the impact of new technology	Investigating the influence of sites of belonging	Exploring the influence of different watchers
Research questions	Mainly 1 – the position	Mainly 2 – work processes	Mainly 1 – the position	1 and 2 – position and work processes
Empirical focus	Experience of handling colliding expectations	Social mediation and effects of gender regarding introduction of new technology	Discrepancy between formal affiliation and experienced belonging	Different ways of being visible and different actors to be visible to
Theoretical focus	Loyalty and provision of time as a means of communication. Overlap between social construction of time and loyalties	Gender and technology, social mediation of technology	Loyalty, identity and communities. Introducing concept of sites of belonging	Gendered visibility, recognition and control, influence of new public management
Themes	Initiating exploration of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities	Foremost risk and possibilities related to work process. Tensions and agency as outcome	Focus foremost on agency. Tensions, risk and possibilities as outcome	Foremost tensions, agency, risk and possibilities secondary
Relates to context	Internal focus	Gender and gender relations	To some degree NPM, foremost internal focus	Gender and NPM
Methods	Interviews with departmental administrators, documents	Mixed methods, mainly departmental administrators	Mixed methods, mainly departmental administrators	Mixed methods, mainly departmental administrators

Paper 1 engages foremost with the first research question, connecting the administrators' position in the organisation to issues of loyalties and competing demands; finding the embryo of tensions (in the conflicting expectations); agency (in the potential to compartmentalise loyalties and manoeuvre between different actors) and the risk and possibilities that are further developed throughout this thesis. The paper addresses debates regarding loyalties and the existence of conflicting expectations, and argues for the relevancy of the concept of loyalty to explore social relations in organisations. Loyalties (as a collective term) is related to an understanding of time as an (among other things) socially constructed communicative medium, in terms of the providing of time and the manifestation of presence, as a way of displaying loyalty and commitment. With that connection made, paper 1 argues that the consideration of multiple loyalties might provide insights into the division of labour and social relationships at the workplace level, affecting, among other things, what is being prioritised, and also the possibility to play different loyalties off against one another, increasing the individual agency of the administrator.

The theme of individual agency, and the informal as well as structural conditions to exercise agency is further explored in paper 2, related to the risk and possibilities brought with the introduction of new technology to the administrators' jobs. Paper 2 foremost relates to the second research question, as the paper is concerned with the formal and informal work processes, rather than the structure of the organisation. Paper 2 contributes with further insights into the theme of tensions, identifying deflected conflicts between multiple actors – management, academics and administrators - in a process of changed organisation of work. It also adds to the debate of indirect consequences of resistance, as it finds that resistance in one place – from the academics towards some of the managerial decisions – creates unintended consequences in terms of risks and opportunities to the departmental administrators' potential to develop their role.

The effects of these tensions, as well as the potential for agency, is further discussed in paper 3, that foremost engages with debates regarding belongings and conceptualisations related to different types work collectives in organisations. Paper 3 most directly addresses research question one, as it is the changed organisational structure and the administrators' position in the organisation that is at the centre of the analysis and exploration. By locating the concept of belonging within an organisational setting, distinguishing between the formal and experienced belongings and adopting the view of multiple, coexisting belongings, paper 3 makes a contribution in introducing the notion of sites of belonging in organisations. The paper offers insights into the process of emerging sites of belonging, as driven by tensions between groups as well as identified similarities within the group, based on shared experiences from work that enables collective agency. Sites of belonging in organisations are, as demonstrated in paper 3, part of an ongoing process where multiple belongings exist simultaneously; influencing one another, and creating different tensions, risks and possibilities.

Paper 4 continues to explore the themes of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities connected to multiple expectation and affiliations that is developed in papers 1, 2 and 3, and locates these issues in a setting of changed managerial logics influenced by NPM and gender. The paper addresses both of the research questions as the position in the organisation as well as the internal work process is discussed. The paper

engages with debates on visibility, exploring the different ways of being visible in the organisation, and how visibility towards different watchers has different effects. It argues that the dynamics of power relations in the organisation, such as gender pattern and influence over the division of labour, is better understood if investigated from multiple points of view, related to the external forces that influence the logic and experiences in the organisation. From the findings in paper 4, a key argument developed is that the effects of visibility must also contain the aspect of “visible to whom” in order to be fully understood.

While the different papers address different aspects of the research questions, the overarching themes abstracted from the papers build to the general conclusion in this project and, taken together, provide the overall answers to the research questions. This general answer is first presented below, and thereafter discussed in relation to NPM and gender.

6.3 Findings related to the context of NPM and gender

The general mechanics behind the institutional changes in this study – the impact of NPM and gender relations in terms of expectations of what the job should be - make the organisational dynamics explored in this study less unique for this organisation. The themes of tensions, agency, risks and possibilities identified in this thesis could be understood as part of a process of disrupted and restructured power structures in the organisation. In that regard, the administrators’ indeterminate position in between different actors and logics could be analysed as part of a process of disrupted and restructured power structures where the traditional profession – the academics – are challenged by managerial principles influenced by new public management, combined with a process of transformation of traditionally female-dominated service occupations taking place in society.

Some of these changes or trends could be seen as the result of “the megatrend of NPM” (Hood, 1991) and on some level of abstractions, that is perhaps an explanation satisfying enough in itself. But closer to the everyday practices that make up reality in all its acts, we could add nuances and details to try to understand what is happening, rather than narrate what happened from a predetermined view of the dominating social relations. The point of departure from this group arguably provides some new insights - one such insight is provided in paper 4, in

the exploration of the focus on measurability and visibility that is the central theme in that paper. Some of the changes in the role might be understood as being propelled by the technological development and the agency of the occupation, or perhaps more accurately, the movement to increase the status and position of these kinds of female-dominated administrative support functions (as discussed in paper 2), in combination with the changing gender pattern within academia. While these in many regards are broad societal processes, they are not the only ones. The changed dynamics and relations in the academic organisation must also be understood in terms of the changing references for what is considered the purpose, functions and relevant measurement for success on a more general level. The increased focus on output and measurability, arguably brought by an adaption to the dominant discourse of NPM, does not only affect the professionals – academics in this case – but the support functions as well. This means an increased focus on visible output on an individual job level, and a changed direction of visibility at an organisational level. The changed position of the administrators is not just an effect of their orientation concerning job content and aspiration, but also a reorientation to adapt to the new power structures in the organisation, where the academics are not the only, or perhaps not always the most important, group to be visible to. These changes in the institutional setting tie in, or are perhaps one of the fundamentals, to the identified themes of tensions, potential agency, risk and possibilities that run through this project.

There is perhaps no need to repeat the consequences in terms of the managerial challenge of the professions here. An additional aspect besides that could be to see the increased focus on output, and the shifting organisational belongings as a way to also equalise or weaken more informal patriarchal hierarchies that previously dictated the role and possibilities for administrative staff. This transformation of administrative service occupations could be seen as disrupting some of the divisions of labour between traditionally male-dominated and female dominated occupations, such as professions and support staff, respectively. Or, perhaps more correctly, it could be considered a process containing different aspects and outcomes, where some dynamics arguably were made more visible when investigated from the perspective of this group.

While there are aspects suggesting the development of the administrator's role partly being a result of the challenging of the historical "office wife" function of traditional secretarial occupations, the interpretation of this only being a result of challenged male privileges in term of what support a (male) professor could ask for, might also be a conflation. One reflection on a bit of a side note, not explicitly discussed in a paper other than briefly in paper 2, is the fact that the groups of academics and administrators are both changing. The administrators of today have higher education levels than their more senior colleagues, and to some extent other expectations on the job. The academics are also changing, if we compare historically - there is a more feminised workforce in some fields, and the academic role is a more gender-balanced occupation in general (Lindberg, et al., 2011). That might also alter the expectations of what should be included in the academics' job, as gender composition tends to affect job content (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1985). More specifically related to this case, Hughes (1996: 237) states that "it is noteworthy that the move to integrate parts of the professional, and clerical, labour processes has coincided with the increased presence of women in this occupation"; perhaps providing another aspect of the changing dynamics regarding the administrator's position. Translated to the setting of this study, that would suggest that the transferring of administrative tasks from administrators towards academics might also be influenced by the increased feminisation of the academic workforce in general. Connected to this at least in some way, is the suggestion that "When women enter an occupation its status falls; when men do so, pay and prospects tend to improve." (Cockburn, 1985: 129). Furthering that interpretation, while beyond the scope of this study to explore, is Kalms' (2019) findings, demonstrating how women in academia tend to perform the "academic housework" much more than men. Here academic housework refers to "the emotional and practical care taking", that at least traditionally has been an informal part of the secretarial job. These are arguably interesting topics to explore, and part of the contextual framing of this study, but as mentioned, were outside the reach of this study to explore in more detail.

What is within the scope of this study, however, are the general themes of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities for this group outside of the dominant organisational power structures, and what new things we

could learn from taking their experiences as a point of departure. So, is there anything new learned besides what has been argued in the papers?

Raising the gaze just a bit from the academic organisations, the themes and dynamics explored and abstracted from this study might resonate with dynamics found in other professional organisations. They are, therefore, of concern to all of us who, in some way, are connected to these kinds of institutions. In practice, this is all of us in our various roles of employees, customers, clients and citizens. These changes in the institutional setting tie in, or are perhaps one of the fundamentals, to the identified themes of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities that runs through this project.

As argued throughout this chapter and summarised here, there are some new aspects provided with this thesis. While the view of organisations as a web of multiple power centres, agents and relations that are informing jobs and influencing the experience and organisation of work is not a new finding, the exploration of how a group at the margin, in this case the administrators, is part of influencing these dynamics as much as being influenced by them, is one contribution of this thesis. So is the importance of the multiplicity of sites of belonging, which might have been overlooked if taking a starting position with actors that have a more clearly defined belonging in terms of being an academic or part of management. The new aspects identified with taking departure from this group, is that this multitude is important to recognise, as it comes with risks and possibilities as well as explanations for developments and actions: as is the insight how the gaps between the local and the organisational, in terms of management at a distance and multiple affiliations, provides increased room for agency and influence over activities in the organisation. These increased possibilities for the departmental administrators as individuals and as a collective to navigate and also shape the organisation, is something made more visible by exploring the organisation from their perspective. The focus on this group also reveals additional layers of the impact of NPM doctrines within organisations. The increased focus on output and measurability arguably brought by an adaption to the dominant discourse of NPM does not

only affect the professionals – academics in this case – but the support functions as well, which is made visible in this project.

6.2 General findings and abstracted themes

The departmental administrators' position in the organisational structure and changes in internal processes of work, have indeed had an influence over the social relationships to other occupational groups in the organisation. The tensions between different groups seem to be a bit of an ever-present feature in the organisation. These tensions could be more visible; such as regarding the introduction of different administrative routines and digital systems (as seen in paper 2); or more underlying, such as the ongoing navigation between different interests and positions as visible in all the papers. One central part of the job, even perhaps an identifying aspect of the departmental administrators as a group, seems to be the handling of those tensions (further developed foremost in paper 3). It is also within these tensions that the departmental administrators, as individuals as well as at a group level, arguably have an increased space for agency. These tensions and ambiguities regarding the division of labour and the influence over the administrator's job content, as well as the distance of the manager physically as well as regarding knowledge and involvement in the everyday activities, create room to manoeuvre in the everyday work situations (paper 1). This gives the individual administrators the potential for agency and discretion (paper 2). At a collective level, their changed position in the organisational structure provides the ground to act as a group, developing their own site of belonging (paper 3), while the changes regarding the organisational logic, the introduction of new technology and the increased focus on measurability, provide different ways of being visible, which in turn have different risk and possibilities in terms of control and recognition, not least on a group level (paper 4).

These tensions and the increased room for agency also come with different risks and possibilities – while the multiple affiliations create the possibility for an increased flexibility and the potential to balance demands by playing different actors off against one another (papers 1 and 3), it also comes with the risk of being caught in the middle, suffering from incompatible demands and work overload. As the vague position and various demands give the possibility for job crafting, the

informality of these opportunities means they can easily disappear with changed personal relationships or shifted positions among the academics. Likewise, the possibility to become visible to different actors in the organisation, gaining increased recognition as an individual and as a group of actors, comes with the risk of being questioned or challenged by those for whom the administrators become less visible in the everyday work (paper 4).

All in all, the themes identified when exploring the research questions with different conceptual lenses deployed in the individual papers, leads to the concluding analysis of the organisation – or perhaps this type of organisation – as a web of multiple power centres, agents and relations that are informing jobs and influencing the experience and organisation of work, where a group at the margins – in this case the departmental administrators - are part of influencing these dynamics while being influenced by them. The exploration of these dynamics is one contribution of this thesis.

One key finding at an organisational level, present already in the setup of this project, but also echoed in the data generated within it, is the experience that the social relationships within academia as a workplace have changed, not least due to new office technology such as computers and digital platforms. This is an important aspect of the themes of tensions, agency, risk and possibilities abstracted from the papers. The use of technology has reduced the human face-to-face interaction and loosened the bonds between actors within the organisation (students, academics, administrators), which arguably has increased tension in the organisation. It has also made work in academia more fragmented and has reduced the workers' control over some parts of the job. Some of the motivating aspects in terms of recognition and a sense of connection that springs from human interactions, have gone missing, which is discussed in papers 2 and 4. At the same time, as discussed in paper 2, new technology has enabled a levelling of jobs in academia, where some of the traditional repetitive tasks have been lifted from administrators, thus giving them room to develop more advanced administrative support functions and providing agency and discretion to the administrators to craft their job. However, the technology in itself is not the sole key determinant of job content; social relationships and loyalty bonds play their part, providing different risks and possibilities, connected to traditions in the local departments. One insight from this project is that

the organisation contains several potential sites of belonging, and important actors to be visible to, as illustrated in papers 3 and 4. This multitude is important to recognise as it comes with risks and possibilities as well as explanations for developments and actions.

An overall finding connected to the tensions and agency explored in this thesis is how the individual's personal visibility moves into the textual domains – in this case being visible as a submitter in a digital system - and become invisible to their previous clients – in terms of reduced face-to-face interaction with students and academics. The administrative service is increasingly formalised and systemised at an organisational level, rather than personally and arbitrarily shaped by local demands. This development is visible in papers 2 and 3, regarding the attempts to streamline the role and some processes, but more directly explored in paper 4 in terms of the visibility of the role. One might recognise this as a process where the “small community” of the discipline is being transformed to the “organisation”, in line with the streamlining of academia discussed in chapters 2 and 4, where the increased use of digital systems and documented processes could be seen as an attempt to centralise management over the departmental administrators' jobs, tying them closer to management.

The transformation to management via digital systems, in practice stating from a distance what the job should consist of, gives the social relations dictating the job(s) a faceless aura of objectivity (Smith 1999). The departmental administrators' jobs are, in that regard, guided by an "invisible" author of the "system text", and connected to the work of others at a distance, as the job is governed and made uniform more by "text" than by direct relationships or management – in other words it “hooks their local work setting into ‘centralised’ regulatory and decision-making processes” (Smith, 2005: 169), located at a distance from the everyday setting where the job is conducted. This in a sense relocates the administration, in terms of internal work processes (RQ2), as well as the individual administrators in the organisation (RQ1). However, this is not the whole picture.

The transformation towards management from a distance, besides what it creates in terms of tensions connected to vague job descriptions and colliding expectations, also enables increased agency in the hands of the departmental administrators. As discussed in papers 1, 2, 3 and to some extent paper 4, this vagueness, “management at a distance”,

and multiple affiliations have given the opportunity to play different sides against each other, as well as to develop their own group and their own site of belonging as a resource to draw upon. Rather than being passive receivers in relation to the ruling “texts”, or the expectations of everyday support from the academics, they use their arguably increased agency to individual job crafting, balancing of demands, and on a collective level to become more visible in the organisation, with the potential to have an agenda of their own. These dynamics, as consequences of centralised management, are made visible by exploring this organisation from the perspective of this particular group.

There is arguably a change in the institution of academia going on, where the traditional dominant rulers, in terms of the possessor of senior academic positions, are being challenged and somewhat replaced by the possessors of different managerial positions - in some ways competing over the power to define what academia should be and do. These changes might be what creates the risk and possibilities connected to multiple belongings and visibility, manifested in changed organisational belonging and a reconfiguration regarding responsibilities in and over different administrative tasks. The uncertainties and tensions in the organisation are, in that regard, an effect of the response to changes in relations in society at large, in this case study more specifically New Public Management and gender. These connections will now be discussed.

6.4 Strengths, limitations and future research

One strength of this study is the focus on this favourable case. The intensive focus on one case provides several opportunities for a range of observations or data generating occasions of that case, making the findings arguably rich and robust (Gerring, 2004). For an explorative study of a group where not much is known, with the intention to trace the everyday experiences of work in an institutional setting (Smith, 2005), it is arguably a solid set up (Gerring, 2004; Hamel et al., 1993).

With that said, this is a case study of one occupational group. While there are strong arguments to be made why the dynamics found in this project would be valid for other similar settings – such as the general underlying dynamics and process of change regarding managerial logics and the division of labour regarding administrative work in professional organisations as well as similar trends regarding work in

academia outside of Sweden - that is perhaps an empirical issue to investigate before any definite claims could be made. These dynamics could be the result of a very specific contextual setting in this specific organisation and the employees producing it. In that regard, this study is situated, and limited, in space. Future research would need to compare, for example, academic organisations in different settings, or different types of professional organisations. The ambition from the European Commission to make EU universities more uniform, would perhaps call for a cross-national study comparing academia in different settings.

As this is a single occasion case study, it is also limited in time. While the narrative of change and reorganisation expands backwards in time, it does so via the study of documents, previous research and not least through the reflexive memories and work-life stories shared by the participants. While this creates a backdrop and frame of interpretation to the analysis of the current situation, it is still somewhat of a snapshot taken during the years this study was conducted. It would be interesting to have samples over a longer period of time to capture any changes in the role and dynamics of the organisation. Besides the expansion in time and space suggested above, such as comparative analyses in different organisational or national settings to explore the influence of case-specific features, there are perhaps more avenues to explore.

The notion of multiple sites of belonging might be a fruitful approach to bring to other types of organisations to explore the occurrence and effect of these different belongings. This could add additional insights to the process behind the formation of collectives and shared identities. An aspect not fully developed in this project is to more thoroughly analyse and differentiate any specific strategies to handle these different belongings. This might be relevant not least in professional organisations and the public sector where different types of belongings and considerations are part of the occupational role. Another avenue would perhaps be to explore the impact of multiple sites of belonging connected to concepts related to psychosocial work environment issues, such as role ambiguities and stress. In terms of development on a conceptual level, there might also be potential connections made to debates and investigations regarding working at distance, the remote office and visibility, in terms of getting recognition and being subject to

control. The initial mapping the impact of to whom one is visible discussed in paper 4 could perhaps be developed for that purpose.

As mentioned in relation to the limitations of this project, it is located in a certain point in time. The dominating trend of NPM as a main source of inspiration for governance has long been a subject of critique, and new types of managerial concepts are gaining attention (Reiter and Klenk, 2019). In the Swedish context, the concept of “trust-based management” is being introduced in the public sector within local municipalities as well as governmental organisations, as a way of rebalancing the power between professionals and management, and to avoid some of the time-consuming administration that comes from the increased focus of providing key figures and measurable outcomes inspired by NPM (SOU 2018:38). The actual impact and outcome of these changes is, however, debated (Björk and Tengblad, 2023). Nonetheless, the impact of these changed doctrines, that of course are already the focus of research, could perhaps be further explored in terms of the relations between different actors within organisations.

There are also some avenues of gender and administration that might be a topic for further research. While this study had a focus on the administrators, the issue of administration in academia, and other professional organisations, has been studied a little more. However, the aspect raised by Hughes (1996) that there seems to be an increase of administrative tasks added to professions as they become more feminised (or less male-dominated), has seemingly gained little attention. On a broader level, the impact changed gender-composition has on an occupation or profession is well explored (Acker, 2006; Cockburn, 1985). However, the more detailed relation between feminisation and increased integration of administrative or clerical tasks within different occupations, has been less explored. The process of digitisation could be an area of exploration from that angle.

This development could arguably be connected to the influence of NPM doctrines, where female-dominated occupations have more difficulty in resisting these types of changes (Björk et al., 2011), which might coincide with the general strength of the profession (Ackroyd et al., 2007). While such a more specific investigation of the relation between digitalisation, administrative tasks and feminisation of professions might add insights in itself, it could also add to the debates regarding

the connection between NPM and the reconfiguration of gender relations in work life.

To conclude, I think it is appropriate to return to the start. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, this project was the result of a long-time curiosity. This curiosity was sparked by an information meeting in an academic department where I was a student, and more precisely by the encounter with Inga, the departmental administrator who was faced with the agitated academic raging about the stupid administrative systems. Since then, this curiosity has been fuelled by other encounters and experiences from academia in various positions, finally leading up to a research endeavour, exploring organisational dynamics from the position of what I initially thought of as an included outsider. During the project, I have learned a lot.

Some of my curiosity has been satisfied while other questions have emerged, informing amongst other things the ideas for further research just presented. My initial perception of the departmental administrators exposed position has been challenged and developed by the findings of agency and emerging sites of belonging, as well as the possibilities for job crafting and room to develop the role. My understanding of the different considerations and logics clashing within academia has also been developed into understanding academia, and perhaps professional public organisations in general, as containing a broader range of actors and power centres besides management and the professionals. I have also obtained a broader and deeper understanding of the role of the departmental administrators; but even more so of the influence informal considerations and social relationships have on the organisation of work. What I first considered as merely tensions and conflicts, grew to a more complex picture of, yes, tensions, but also how those tensions enabled an increased agency, and how different occupational groups are all part of the ongoing negotiation, coordination and construction that reproduces in an organisation and the organisation of work. And, of course, the different risks and possibilities that influence all actors in processes of change as well as the status quo, where the action of one set of actors set the conditions in terms of hindrances and opportunities for another.

Hopefully, these insights could also be of value to Inga, the administrator at the meeting presented in the introduction of this thesis, and her colleagues - administrators as well as academics – as it formulates and

brings up these social relationships from the realm of the individual experiences to the realm of shared knowledge, where they can be analysed, discussed and further explored. If nothing else, it might be a fruitful endeavour to compare this narrative with one's own experience to see how it fits. From that, one could perhaps also reflect over, if this is how it is – how would we want it to be? And how do we make it so? Finally - this exploration of the social relationships from an overlooked group and its contribution in terms of the dynamics of a multiplicity of power relations and sites of belongings, might hopefully spark further curiosity for other striving students and researchers to find other points of departures and positions to explore the fascinating dynamics of society and social interaction that are constantly going on, in what we in Sweden often (incorrectly) refer to as “den gråa vardagen” [the grey everyday life]. That was at least my ambition.

7 References

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The indeterminate position in-between

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The results are presented in four research papers, focusing on aspects such as loyalties, technology, belongings and visibility, that together paint a picture of the administrators as being in an indeterminate position between different actors, expectations and organisational logics. This position comes with both risks related to the tension between management and academics, and possibilities in terms of increased agency as individuals as well as a group.

This case study is situated within broader trends in society, such as new public management and the transformation of gendered occupations. While set within a university, the transformation of management doctrines and administrative work is also well known to be occurring in other sectors, such as healthcare, education and law enforcement making the findings in this study relevant to other settings.

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