Professional support staff in higher education: networks and associations as sense givers

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the functions that professional networks could have as sense givers during the process in which professional support staff at higher education institutions make sense of their roles. The empirical data comprise interviews with three categories of support staff at three technical universities in Sweden and a review of home pages and other written sources from ten, both Swedish and international, professional networks. One conclusion is that the networks can serve as sense givers for the professional support staff related either to the professional task or to the relational characteristics. However, these functions are not straightforward. The support staff in focus comprise a new category, with no ready-made scripts for their roles. Given that membership in these networks is voluntary, the networks may face challenges in their functions as sense givers. The networks thus opt for other ways of attracting members. This voluntariness in combination with a plasticity in the roles of the support staff suggests that the functions of professional networks not only will vary, but might also be limited as sense givers in the sense making process of professional support staff at higher education institutions (HEIs).

Keywords Professional support staff · Administrators · Sense making · Sense giving · Professional networks · Sweden

A general trend in the university sector is for traditional support functions, such as those of secretaries and technicians, to be replaced by new professionalised administrative functions (Maassen et al. 2017; Ryttberg and Geschwind 2017). This replacement is commonly explained by the changing environmental conditions for higher education institutions (HEIs),

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with their expanded and diversified missions (Schneijderberg and Merkator 2013) which, in turn, also affect the ways in which HEIs are run (Baltaru and Soysal 2018; Ramirez and Tiplic 2014). An expression of the latter is that managerial practices in the private sector are by HEIs perceived as offering efficient solutions and a form of role model. Implications for the HEIs organisational makeup have been an increased goal orientation as well as increased focus on technical effectiveness and accountability (Baltaru and Soysal 2018; Tolofari 2005). A more managerial mode of steering in research has also been associated with an increase in the number of administrative staff and a demand for new competences, along with declining influence and autonomy for academics (Blümel 2008; Ginsberg 2011; Gornitzka et al. 1998; Macfarlane 2011).

In this study, this new category of staff is represented by business liaison, internationalisation and research support staff at three Swedish universities with a technical orientation. Their functions typically require highly educated specialists and experts in specific areas of administration (Schneijderberg and Merkator 2013). Furthermore, they do not identify themselves with the term *administrator* (Ryttberg and Geschwind 2017), which refers to functions that are more clerical or secretarial (Whitchurch 2006). In this study, this new category of staff is designated as professional support staff.

According to Whitchurch (2006), professional support staff are characterised by being fairly unbounded in relation to their organisational unit. They identify more with what Whitchurch refers to as a project domain. This is where professional support staff represent roles that are more proactive within given structures and are able to traverse inherited practices and fields to deliver broadly based projects across the university. Their unboundedness, according to Whitchurch, implies that they disregard organisational boundaries and perceive little difference between internal and external space (Whitchurch 2008a, b). They might thus be described as rather mobile or fluid in their character. The three categories of staff targeted in this study, involved with business liaison, internationalisation and research, are all experts in distinctly different fields and thus do not necessarily find a community of peers to identify with within their HEI.

The aim of this study is to explore the functions of professional networks as sense givers for professional support staff who work in the areas of business liaison, internationalisation and research, in their processes of identification and making sense of their roles. As a sign of the differences between the professional support staff categories, this study also shows that there are specialised professional networks for the three respective categories of support staff. Two specific questions in this exploration are how these networks present the benefits of membership and how the support staff express the advantages of networking.

There are professional associations for all kinds of occupations (Noordegraaf 2007). Financial planners, information technology workers, biotechnologists, architects, journalists, designers, translators—even cartoonists, body piercers and pet sitters—portray and organise themselves as professionals. These professional bodies develop educational programs, train and select members and introduce enforceable codes of conduct. Such professionalisation has, according to Noordegraaf (2007), two major objectives. One is to try to establish professional control (Freidson 2001) and the other is occupational closure (Abbott 2014), through which professional workers can govern themselves and mitigate outside interference. Another perspective on professional associations is provided by Greenwood et al. (2002), who have focused on the functions of regulatory professional associations in the processes of de-institutionalisation and change. They claim that professional associations play a critical role in forming and reproducing shared meanings and understandings. Associations can, by hosting

a process of discourse through which change is debated and endorsed, both legitimise change for professionalised roles and reframe professional identities as they are presented to others outside the profession. Professional identities can thus be reconstituted. Greenwood et al. (2002) base their study on the accounting profession, which, they suggest, is an example of a profession with a greater plasticity in identity than, for example, the legal profession.

One possible effect of this plasticity may be that jurisdictional change is less contested and more easily legitimised. The structures that determine the relative plasticity of boundaries for a profession are unclear, however, and according to Greenwood et al. (2002), they would be worth examining and determining in further research. Their study also suggests that professional networks can be viewed as arenas in which definitions of membership and conduct can be socially constructed for its members. Law communities exemplify such an arena—which can often be highly organised—in which membership may be mandatory, participation is extensive and formal interaction and communication are highly developed. Such an arena contrasts with other non-professionalised settings where there is a diversity of membership and a lack of collective mechanisms and interaction. Greenwood et al. (2002) observe that it would be interesting to compare networks that have mandatory membership with those in which membership is voluntary.

In line with this call, Parada et al. (2010) have studied voluntary professional associations. According to their research, the nature of these associations leads them to a continuous legitimisation of their actions for their current and potential members. By organising activities such as courses, programmes and seminars, these voluntary professional associations represent a space in which members can socialise, share knowledge and develop a cultural understanding while fostering personal individual development (Jarvis 2012).

This present study is in part a response to Greenwood et al. (2002) call for more research on networks with voluntary membership. The purpose is to add to the knowledge about professional support staff at HEIs and, more specifically, the functions of professional networks as potential sense givers to this category of staff.

Professional networks in role definition and sense making

As stated above, professional support staff at HEIs comprise a category of staff that do not identify themselves with traditional administrative roles. In addition, they do not identify primarily with the organisational unit in which they are employed. In previous research, they have been described as unbounded, hybrids or perimeter staff (Middlehurst 2009; Whitchurch 2006), with possible implications for their identity construction (Ryttberg and Geschwind 2017; Whitchurch 2010) and the way they make sense of their roles. Identification has long been understood to be a critical element of sense making (Bévort and Suddaby 2016). The concept of sense making—as applied on the roles of the professional support staff together with the functions of professional networks as potential sense givers—constitutes the conceptual lens for this study.

Professional support staff and sense making

In the process of identity construction, identifying with a community is important (Henkel 2005; Taylor 1989). It can offer individuals a language, worldview, ideas and myths that can be

used for the creation of a sensible sense of self. This is further emphasised by Weick (1995), who states that identities are constructed in a process of interaction. Through this interaction, situations and organisations are talked into existence (Weick et al. 2005). In the context of this study, professional networks constitute potential communities and arenas for communication and interaction in which professional support staff might make sense of their somewhat unclear roles. Sense making derives from the need within individuals to have a sense of identity in which communication is the central means. This process of making sense in our minds is where a given actor strives to structure the unknown by labelling, bracketing and categorising events, ideas and issues (Weick et al. 2005).

Central to this process and the context of this study are several questions posed by Weick (1995): *how* is sense made or constructed, *what* is being constructed and what are the *effects*? The labelled, bracketed and categorised events will have plasticity in that they are socially defined and interrelated to the organisational and social context to which they belong (Weick et al. 2005). The *how* and the *effects* in this study comprise the potential functions of the professional networks as sense givers, which are examined further in the next section. With regard to *what* is being constructed in this process of making sense, one answer could be what Barley and Tolbert (1997) refer to as ‘scripts’. These are defined as observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting. The process of sense making comprises four stages. It starts with the *encoding* of a situation or event, which takes place during socialisation and involves an individual’s internalising of rules and interpretations of appropriate behaviour into scripts for particular settings (Berger and Luckman 1971). This is followed by an *enactment* of these scripts by actors who have encoded the institutional principles. The scripts are then either *revised* or *replicated* to inform the upcoming action. A final stage is when this ‘interaction order’ becomes *externalised* and *objectified* (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Bévort and Suddaby 2016) and thereby also institutionalised.

Previous research by Whitchurch (2015) shows that because the roles of professional support staff are unbounded, such staff are likely to be aware of how and to what extent boundaries might be pushed or redefined, where there is potential for new spaces to be created and what the associated costs and benefits are likely to be. Given that identification is crucial in the process of sense making, however, this awareness could also be a challenge for professional support staff (Bévort and Suddaby 2016). There might be few observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction or work descriptions on which the support staff can rely. In other words, there are no ready-made scripts for them to interpret their roles or the organisational expectations of their roles (Weick et al. 2005).

Sense making is incomplete, according to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), unless there is also a sense giving, a sense making variant undertaken to nurture and create meanings for the target community. The content of sense giving (present versus future image) and the target (insider versus outsider) affect how people interpret the actions they confront. In the context of this study, this would be actors who in some way attempt to provide support staff with a ‘viable interpretation of a new reality’ and try to make them ‘adopt it as their own’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, p. 443), in other words, professional networks.

Professional networks and sense giving

In this study, professional networks with professional support staff at HEIs as their members are explored as potential sense givers, in particular, *how* this works and the possible *effects*.

More specifically, this study explores the potential role of professional networks as sense givers in the process of script construction by professional support staff.

In theoretical terms, there is a distinction between networks and professional associations, although this is not clear cut. Networks may be defined as webs of active affiliation, acting as conduits that channel the flow of ideas and information and existing only as long as a relationship endures (Powell and Oberg 2017). Networks also can play a role as a mechanism for sense making (Owen-Smith and Powell 2008). Professional associations, by contrast, are more organised than networks and aim to devise and promulgate standards in their arenas (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000). They present themselves as gathering experts in an attempt to be perceived as legitimate. Such bodies typically lack coercive powers and do not have sufficient economic resources to induce compliance to the ‘rules’ enunciated; instead, they attempt to influence the behaviour of others by setting standards, propagating principles or proposing ‘benchmarks’ to gauge progress and guide such behaviour. This understanding of professional associations is in line with Abbott (2014), who claims that for professional support staff to advance jurisdictional claims, the organisation has to be recognised and of ample scope. The size of the organisation also indicates the maturity of the professional project.

Following Greenwood et al. (2002), the functions and importance of professional networks can be separated into three groups:

First, they can be arenas in which organisations interact and collectively represent themselves to one another. Organisational actors use these networks to develop typifications and storytelling to guide the members. Their interactions allow them to create common understandings of reasonable conduct in their profession and to support the delineation of the profession over which members claim jurisdictional exclusivity.

Second, professional networks can act as negotiating or representative agencies, shaping and redefining appropriate practices of interaction for their respective memberships. They are a means through which the members represent themselves to other actors inside and outside the field.

Third, professional networks can play a role in monitoring compliance with normatively and coercively sanctioned expectations. Initially, the development of collective beliefs is probably partly functional. Once established, these beliefs and practices can become taken for granted and reproduced through processes such as training and education, hiring and certification and ceremonies of celebration. Professional networks can play a role in defining or enforcing collective beliefs and can thus be part of the explanation for the sustained resilience of institutional practices.

In summary, some professional networks can be characterised as being closed, controlling and norming, with explicit qualifications for entrance to a profession. At the other end of a scale, there are networks for which membership is voluntary and that functions as an open arena for meetings and problem solving of whatever issues arise.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that professional support staff at HEIs can still be conceptualised as a new category of staff (Schneijderberg and Merkator 2013), with unclear scripts for their roles and for whom, research shows, networking could play a part in giving sense to their professional roles. Theories about sense making and sense giving—and more specifically the construction of scripts—constitute the conceptual lens for the study. The framework is operationalised by empirical findings on how networks express the benefits of membership and how professional support staff at HEIs describe the advantages of their participation in these networks.

Method

With the aim of exploring the functions of professional networks as potential sense givers to professional support staff at HEIs, the research was designed as a qualitative study inspired by an interpretative approach (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2017). Interpretative research, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979), involves investigating phenomena, in this case the roles of professional networks for professional support staff and interpreting them in ways that uncover new, useful theoretical and practical understandings. The research process started with semi-structured interviews, followed by a review of the web pages of professional networks and finally an analysis of these empirical findings with the support of the conceptual lens. By triangulation, using two different sources of data to bear on the same point, the aim was to catch multiple perspectives and to corroborate and illuminate the functions of the professional networks (Marshall and Rossman 2014). The triangulation adds to the validity of the study (Creswell 2013).

Analytically, following the interpretative line, the research process was iterative, going back and forth between the empirical data gathered and the theoretical framework of sense making and the roles of professional networks. Two themes were considered when analysing the data: how the networks presented the benefits of membership and how the professional support staff expressed the advantages of their networking.

The data collection for this study was conducted in three phases. The point of departure was to interview professional support staff within the fields of business liaison, internationalisation and research at three Swedish universities with a technical orientation. The interviews were conducted in autumn 2015. These three categories of staff constituted a purposive sample (Cohen et al. 2011). They were chosen as representatives of functions that differ from those of traditional administrative roles and because they also have links to changes in the societal context surrounding HEIs.

In most instances, potential informants could be identified by their organisational affiliation and title. In some cases, additional names were suggested to us. In the end, we selected five informants from support staff involved in business liaison, five informants from staff involved in internationalisation and nine informants from staff involved in supporting research. The focus in the semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkman 2009) was the meaning (or advantages of) that the informants saw in networking and which networks they were involved in. In the 19 interviews, the names of 13 specific networks came up, in reference to the informants' reflections on networking in general and these networks in particular. The interviews normally lasted around 1 h. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim and thereafter analysed qualitatively through a process of reading, coding and interpreting (Cohen et al. 2011). The interviews opened up the possibility of learning more about these specific networks.

The second phase of the study involved a review of the 13 aforementioned networks, which were varied in terms of formalisation and organisation. Nine of the networks had a web page or were linked to another organisation's web page. The other four were based on an email list. Due to the lack of information about the latter networks,¹ selected informants from all three categories of professional support staff were contacted via telephone and/or email to clarify interview data and to obtain names of persons to contact for more information about these specific networks.

¹ Higher Education and Society in Collaboration (HSS), the Swedish Funding Officers network, the European Union Research & Development (EUR&D) network, the University Network for Strategic Internationalisation (UNSI)

The review started by finding basic data for the networks, see Table 1. The following indicators were used:

- Level of organisation²: The authors assessed the degree of organisation as low, medium or high. Those with a high level of organisation had boards, steering committees, general assemblies and/or working groups. They also had home pages where the objectives, target groups, benefits of membership and agendas are described. The networks with a low level of organisation were based on email lists, used both for daily contact between stakeholders in the field and for organising activities.
- Geographical area: national, Nordic, European or worldwide.
- Target group: professional support staff, academics and other stakeholders with an interest in the higher education (HE) sector. As the focus of this study is professional support staff, three networks aimed mainly at academics were excluded, leaving ten of interest.
- Funding: fee based or self-funded, i.e. the participants pay their own cost in activities.

Two of these networks, SUHF (The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions) and NUAS (The Nordic Association of University Administrators), differ from the others in that they are organised in subgroups. SUHF represents 37 HEIs in Sweden and is comprehensive in its agenda, covering both academic and administrative issues. SUHF has developed to become a recognised consultation body for referrals from government. Examples of subgroups are the Expert Group for Collaboration, the Expert Group for Research Administration and the Expert Group for Internationalisation. NUAS is a member-driven collaborative organisation that today includes 65 universities and university colleges in the Nordic countries. NUAS is a purely administrative network, with 14 subgroups that focus on specific administrative disciplines, such as internationalisation and research and innovation.

After collecting this basic information (see Table 1) about the selected professional networks, the focus turned to how these networks present the benefits of membership and how professional support staff express the advantages of networking. The empirical findings are presented in the next section.

The last stage of the research design involved analysing the empirical findings from the network reviews and the interviews, with the support of the conceptual lens for the study, described above.

Results

Professional networks as sense givers

To explore the functions of professional networks as sense givers, the reviews of the networks were guided by examining the *objectives* of the specific network interpreted as expressions of the benefits of membership.

² KLOSSnet was still quite new at the time of this study. A majority of the Swedish HEIs have agreed to participate in KLOSSnet, and information about the organisation was found on the web page of one of the Swedish HEIs.

Table 1 Professional networks

Abbreviations/ translation to English	Website —yes/ no	Full name/Swedish name/translation to English*:	Field:	Founded:	Level of organisation: Low/ medium/ high:	Geographical area	Target group:	Funding:
			Business liaison/ internationalisation/ research/general:			Sweden/ Nordic/ Europe/ worldwide:	Support staff/ stakeholders (various):	Fee based/ self- funding:
HSS	No	Högskola och samhälle i samverkan <i>Higher Education and Society in Collaboration</i> *	Business liaison		Low	Sweden	Stakeholders	Self-funding
KLOSSnet	(Yes)	Kunskap och lärande om strategisk samverkan <i>Knowledge Exchange and Learning About Strategic Collaboration</i> *	Business liaison	2017	Medium	Sweden	Support staff stakeholders	Self-funding
SNITTS	Yes	Swedish network for innovation and technology transfer support	Business liaison	2009	High	Sweden	Support staff	Self-funding
AESIS	Yes	Network for Advancing and Evaluating the Societal Impact of Science	Research		High	Worldwide	Stakeholders	Self-funding
EARMA	Yes	European Association of Research Managers and Administrators	Research	1995	High	Europe	Stakeholders	Fees
<i>Swedish Funding Officers Network*</i> <i>The EUR&D Network*</i>	No	Nätverket för svenska forskningsfinansieringshandläggare EU-FOU Nätverket <i>The European Union Research and Development Network</i> **	Research		Low	Sweden	Support staff	Self-funding
UNSI - University Net work for Strategic Internationalisation	No	Universitetsnätverket för strategisk internationalisering	Research	1994	Low	Sweden	Support staff	Self-funding
NUAS	Yes	The Nordic Association of University Administrators	Internationalisation		Low	Sweden	Support staff	Self-funding
SUHF	Yes	The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions	General General	1976 1995	High High	Nordic Sweden	Support staff Stakeholders	Fees Fees

Italicized entries are translations to English

*Translated by authors

Four networks in this study have business liaison staff as their main target group or have a subgroup for this category. The University and Society in Collaboration (HSS) network has the objective of gathering together professionals working in business life, the public sector and academia to enhance collaboration between partners. HSS arranges a conference every second year on different themes with the aim of giving participants an arena for inspiration and ideas. This is an example of an organisation with no web page.

SNITTS (the Swedish network for innovation & technology transfer support) focuses on professional support staff working in technology transfer. It has the objective of supporting staff who work both strategically and hands-on in knowledge exchange and the dissemination of research. For SNITTS, the benefits of membership for support staff lie in the possibility of acquiring support in one's professional role, the exchange of work experiences, the chance to network and the opportunity to start or join special interest groups. SNITTS also provides courses and certification.

Collaboration is one of the expert subgroups of SUHF. It has the mission of following HEIs' development of strategic collaboration with the surrounding society, within both research and education, and contributing to experience sharing.

KLOSSnet is a new actor in the Swedish HE arena and presents its objective as providing a collegial platform for leaders responsible for knowledge and learning about strategic collaboration in the HE sector. According to KLOSSnet, the benefit of membership lies, among other things, in the exchange of experiences with the aim of enhancing relevance and quality in research and education, as well as the utilisation of academic knowledge in society.

This study examined six different networks or subgroups for research support staff at HEIs in Sweden. The Swedish Funding Officers network provides a meeting point for discussions between researchers from different HEIs about upcoming announcements about research grants, cooperation and joint applications and processing. There is also the European Union Research and Development (EUR&D) network, which seems to have a broader agenda, with the objective of sharing and exchanging experiences, contacts and knowledge about how to optimise support for researchers at HEIs. Of potential advantage for members, the EUR&D network arranges training courses for support staff. Furthermore, the network acts as a sounding board when national stakeholders with an interest in the European framework are invited to the network.

One association with a worldwide scope and the features of a full organisation is the Network for Advancing and Evaluating the Societal Impact of Science (AESIS). Some of its members have roles at their respective HEIs that involve stimulating and demonstrating the impact of science on the economy, culture and well-being. Others have positions as evaluators, scientometricians or policymakers at research councils or funding agencies. AESIS has the aim of developing effective instruments for evaluating and advancing the societal impact of science by sharing best practice. The benefits of membership are presented in terms of an extended network of peers and experts on impact, a specified interest group network and the latest news about impact. In addition, AESIS offers courses in research strategy. According to AESIS, membership also is rewarding because the network functions as a platform for sharing institutional performances and scientometric publications.

European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA) presents itself as an organisation for professional development of research funding support. Members work in industry, academia and the public and private sectors. According to EARMA's home page, the organisation has come to be seen as the representative association at the European level for research managers and administrators. On the same page, EARMA highlights its ambition to be an essential partner in developing the strategic research support profession towards a

recognised European standard. Concrete benefits for members lie, for example, in its fellowship exchange programme, the EARMA Professional Development Programme, an annual conference, continuous training and information series, certification and workshops and seminars for professional staff supporting research.

Both SUHF and NUAS have subgroups for research support issues. The overall objective of the SUHF's subgroup for research administrators is to encourage the national exchange of experiences and to strengthen the HEI sector in Sweden with regard to research administrative issues, both nationally and internationally. Examples of potential benefits for members are the annual seminar for HEIs and research funding agencies and an annual conference with research administration as the theme.

The NUAS's Research and Innovation subgroup has research support staff in the Nordic countries as its main community. The objective is to enhance the skills of research administrative staff in order to enable member institutions to improve their overall performance. The benefit of membership for institutions includes development of new and better methods and services in innovation activities, pre- and post-award research assessment and quality assurance. The subgroup promotes the exchange of experiences and best practice to provide valuable strategic tools.

Three networks or subgroups in the internationalisation field are included in this study. One comes in two fractions. The universities have the UNSI and the university colleges have their own community. These networks exist to address increased student mobility, especially due to the introduction of tuition fees in Sweden in 2011, which produced a number of new administrative matters that required attention. The objective for these networks is to provide an arena where support staff who work with internationalisation at an HEI can discuss and exchange experiences concerning, for example, migration and governmental initiatives. The knowledge transfer between these two networks is secured by one representative from each network taking part in the other's conferences.

Both SUHF and NUAS have internationalisation subgroups. The expert group at SUHF has as its objectives to work on strategic issues concerning internationalisation with an emphasis on improving the preconditions for internationalisation at HEIs and creating arenas for the exchange of experiences between member HEIs. In its role as a comprehensive organisation for a majority of HEIs in Sweden, the expert group for internationalisation within SUHF also has the objective of strengthening contacts between the formal and informal networks in the field. The NUAS subgroup for internationalisation has the objective of looking at topics that reflect the extensive changes in Nordic and European research and the field of education. Concrete activities are seminars for support staff working with internationalisation at member HEIs.

Professional networks as sense makers³

The review of the professional networks above focused on how the networks presented the benefits of membership in their networks. Now focus turns to how the 19 informants in this study expressed the advantages and challenges of networking. The three categories of professional support staff under study—business liaison, internationalisation and research—have in

³ The interviews are numbered for transparency in the following way: I/BL/R refers to the three different categories of professional support staff in this study (I: internationalisation, BL: business liaison, R: research). The number after the hyphen refers to the informants in the respective category of professional support staff.

common the fact that their roles differ from the traditional administrative roles at HEIs. They all have functions with close links to the surrounding society. However, as we will see, the categories differ significantly from one another in other ways.

The overall question was how the informants would describe their networking. A common way to answer was to describe the networks in terms of sounding boards for discussions about problem solving. The professional support staff members in this study who work in internationalisation highlighted both Swedish professional networks and the importance of being active in European and international networks for facilitating future personal contacts, '[W]e need such a forum in which we can highlight common issues and [the network] is a very important sounding board' (I-1).

Closely connected to the sounding board function of networking is a benefit which could be designated 'problem solving'. Support staff who work with internationalisation expressed this as: '[W]e have quite a lot of problems with visas and insurance, and the [UNSI] network is very useful' (I-3). Another informant, also working with internationalisation, explained the benefits of networking by saying that it 'isn't really a requirement, but it is always useful to have contacts at other HEIs to discuss how you have acted in relation to a specific programme or how you work with certain issues' (I-4). This is in line with the comment of an informant from the research support staff who described their two informal networks as 'useful for both asking and answering questions that can't be solved within our own organisation' (BL-4).

Networking as a source of knowledge is another function highlighted by the informants. An informant, working with research support, reported that '[I]f it is about obtaining knowledge, the national network is a fantastic service. [This network] is supposedly unique, according to those who travel a lot' (R-6). In addition to being a source of information and knowledge, networking can also be a source for 'work methods, that is an example with concrete utility' (R-9).

The networking, as a way of connecting and keeping in touch with colleagues working with equivalent tasks at other HEIs, was emphasised by several informants. One informant highlighted a European network as 'a fantastic group of support staff with an email list where I can pose questions and know that I will reach everyone within my profession in Sweden ... an incredible body of knowledge to be backed up by, in a sense' (R-4). Two informants working in the business liaison area described the networks as very strong and said that staff in this area have always appreciated networking a lot: It 'goes without saying that you should collaborate with others. Why shouldn't we?' (BL-4); and '[W]e are good at networking, we really are' (BL-5).

Research support staff described the benefits of informal networking when there are no fees and no steering committees: '[I]t's just a very good network, with staff who work with exactly what we do [at my university]' (R-2). This informant also emphasised the benefit of meeting colleagues from previous workplaces or whom the informant had known for a long time. According to one informant (I-5), one characteristic of the support staff role in the area of internationalisation is that you may have few colleagues at your own HEI. This further enhances the benefits of networking.

There are also some challenges with networking that came to the fore in the interviews. One was that the roles of these three categories of staff can differ between HEIs. For example, one informant noted that '[W]e are very diverse among the internationalisation staff. We were really not into talking about the same issues [at the network events]. And that was when the networking faded away ...' (I-3). This was further emphasised by the informant, who added, 'I

don't really fit [into this context]' (R-3). The main explanation for the diversity among staff is that both the work tasks and how they are organised can vary a lot between the different HEIs.

Another challenge is to prioritise networking. It is, as one informant put it, 'far too easy to be inward looking ... But we try to have some sort of benchmarking component in our development projects' (R7). It is clear from the interviews that it takes an investment in time before networking offers advantages. The professional support staff have to find their appropriate network, which will develop in parallel as they do so. One informant highlighted one network that had 'evolved from an opportunity to cry in each other's arms for being misunderstood and undervalued at their respective work place to today being more of a support for strategic actions and work methods' (BL-4).

Summary of values of networking

The review of the ten networks resulted in a number of values which in the context of this study were interpreted as contributing to sense giving. The analysis of the 19 interviews also resulted in a number of values, however in this case contributing to the sense making of the roles as professional support staff. These values are visualised in Table 2, whereof a number of them are common for the professional networks and the professional support staff.

Concluding discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the functions that professional networks could have as sense givers for professional support staff in the process of making sense of their roles within the areas of business liaison, internationalisation and research at three Swedish universities with a technical orientation. The empirical data for the study have several features. The information on the websites could be conceived as consciously balanced and strategic. However, the interviews, performed by researchers with a background as administrators, are an expression of quite straightforward communication. The methodological approach of the study, with triangulation, thus provides a more nuanced picture, beyond the rhetoric of the formal websites.

With the aim of exploring the roles of professional networks as potential sense givers, the study was based on two basic questions or themes: How do these networks present the benefits

Table 2 Comparison of professional networks' objectives and the benefits of professional support staff (members)

Professional networks—value as sense givers	Common benefits	Professional support staff—value as sense makers
Arena—inspiration/ideas/experience sharing	✓	Sounding board
Exchange best practice	✓	Problem solving/benchmarking
Knowledge exchange	✓	Obtaining knowledge
Follow development in sector		
Enhance quality of academic knowledge		
Extended network of peers and experts	✓	Reach everyone in the arena/colleagues
Enhance and develop skills of research support profession		
Development and support of methods/services/strategies	✓	Work methods/strategic action
Improve preconditions within area		Emotional support

of membership and how did the professional support staff express the advantages of networking?

The ten networks in this study can be divided in those more formally organised, as indicated by having a web page, and those whose organisation is based on an email list. The highly organised networks (see Table 1) are all quite straightforward in the descriptions of their objectives and benefits of membership. In common for the ten networks studied is that membership is voluntary. This voluntariness comes with challenges in the continuous legitimisation of the network's actions in relation to current and potential members and, thereby, their potential roles as sense givers (Greenwood et al. 2002; Parada et al. 2010).

One assumption in this study is that the three targeted categories of support staff all have in common that their roles could be interpreted as with high plasticity (Greenwood et al. 2002), if compared to the classical professions, such as law or medicine (Abbott 2014; Freidson 2001). There are no clear boundaries for their roles and thereby few ready-made scripts encoded or enacted. According to Larson (2013), a lack of scripts allows for variety in how such roles appear, despite their apparent similarity at first sight. Beyond the variety within each category of staff in this study, there are also differences between how the three categories of support staff perceive networking. For example outreach networking appear more as part of the role for business liaison staff compared to staff supporting research activities at their HEI. The effect could thus be that the benefits of networking for the professional support staff will be disparate, which in turn affects the role of each network as a sense giver and contributor in the construction of scripts for the roles of support staff. Not all informants in this study found peers to mirror when trying to network.

As shown by Table 2, there are a number of common benefits of networking as expressed in significant agreement by the networks themselves and by the informants. Another way of summing up the benefits of networking that the professional support staff highlighted in this study is by dividing them into two categories: task-related and relational. Task-related benefits are when the networks offer support in solving specific issues or problems that are likely to occur at other HEIs. Examples are exchange programs, research funding and business liaison. Benefits of a relational character arise when the support staff perceive the networks to be an arena that compensates for not having that many colleagues at their home HEI and when the networks function as a general sounding board. This division may also be described as different levels of concretion in value of networking.

We can conclude from this study that the professional networks can function as sense givers for professional support staff in their process of making sense of their roles. In line with Greenwood et al. (2002) *first* category of functions that networks can have, the networks in this study can function as arenas for interaction and encoding for support staff. They can test ideas and develop typification and storytelling to bring back home to their HEIs, which is central in the construction of scripts for their professional roles (Weick et al. 2005). The EUR&D network, the SNITTS and the UNSI all highlight their functions as an arena for knowledge exchange. As a substitute for mandatory membership and to attract participation from support staff, some of the networks offer courses, training and even certification. In a long run, the networks could, by creating common understanding of specific roles, support the delineation of the specificities or scripts of the roles of professional support staff. At that point, a professional role could also be described as enacted and more objectified, externalised and institutionalised (Barley and Tolbert 1997).

A *second* category of role that networks can have, according to Greenwood et al. (2002), involves acting as negotiators or representative agencies on the members' behalf and in relation to other actors. It is exemplified in this study by the SUHF, which presents its role as following developments in the sector and acting as a consultation body for referrals from the government. Furthermore, the SUHF has national preconditions for internationalisation on its agenda. Another example is EARMA, which presents itself as developing the research support profession towards a recognised European standard. These are both examples of more formalised networks that also have an agenda that was not highlighted by the informants in this study.⁴

A limitation to this study is the context dependency of Swedish HEI organisations (Marshall and Rossman 2014), as well as the limited empirical basis of the study. The intention has been to shed some light on the dynamics of sense-giving processes as a central ingredient in the process of making sense of the roles of professional support staff.

Larson (2013) stated that a recognisable professional association is a marker for the maturity of a professional project. This study suggests that the networks enable encoding of the roles of the professional support staff. However, their roles may not yet be developed enough for the networks to have a role in the enactment of specific scripts (Weick et al. 2005). The plasticity of the boundaries of the professional support staff is a challenge for the networks in having a role as sense givers. Another perspective on this category of staff is that they might not strive for too many scripts in their roles. They need and demand a certain amount of freedom in their shaping of their roles (Ryttberg and Geschwind 2017). The constantly changing environmental conditions for HEIs imply that the support staff has to be perceptive and adaptive. To this end, they may prefer an openness and high level of plasticity and use the professional networks to take stock of how other HEIs handle issues that are in common for the sector.

An overall conclusion from this study may be that the process of structuring, labelling, bracketing and categorising the activities within their roles of the professional support staff is an ongoing process. The plasticity of their roles indicates that the professional networks impact as sense givers will vary and may, in some cases, play a limited role in the process of making sense for the professional support staff.

The contribution of this study lies in its extension of knowledge about three specific categories of professional support staff at HEIs and their process of identity construction. The study also adds to the body of knowledge about the functions of professional networks with voluntary membership (Greenwood et al. 2002; Parada et al. 2010).

Several questions arise for future research regarding how the roles of professional support staff are going to develop. Will changes in the surrounding society and governance of HEIs entail constant changes and new types of support staff roles? Will the roles of professional support staff at HEIs reach a stage at which the scripts for their roles are externalised and objectified? The latter stage is a precondition for professional networks playing a role in monitoring compliance with normatively and coercively sanctioned expectations, according to Greenwood et al.'s (2002) *third* role of networks.

⁴ The third role that networks can have, according to Greenwood et al. (2002), is not applicable to the networks in this study due to the voluntary nature of membership in these networks

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