The Rise of Third Space Professionals: Implications for Individuals and Institutions

DAAD, Bonn, 29 April 2019

Dr Celia Whitchurch
Associate Professor
Centre for Global Higher Education
UCL Institute of Education
A Delicate Balance: Optimising Individual Aspirations and Institutional Missions in Higher Education
Celia Whitchurch, William Locke, Giulio Marini (March 2019)
Project 3.2 Working Paper 45 http://www.researchcghe.org

Reconstructing Relationships in Higher Education: Challenging agendas
Celia Whitchurch and George Gordon (SRHE Routledge 2017)
drawing on Staffing Models and Institutional Flexibility (LFHE Project) and Meeting the Staff Development Needs of the Changing Academic Workforce (HEA Project)

Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of Third Space Professionals
Celia Whitchurch (SRHE Routledge 2013) drawing on Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures (LFHE Project)
A changing academic and professional workforce

- Significant numbers of staff have worked in other sectors/move in and out; leading to mobility/fluidity

- Younger generations of staff more proactive - less dependent on formal career structures, taking a portfolio approach, interpreting/developing roles

- Mismatch between formal misunderstandings of institutional policy and ways in which these are interpreted in practice eg proportions of teaching/research/pastoral care/community engagement
• This can lead to ‘hidden’ activity and ‘mis-recognition’
• Structures such job descriptions often inaccurate
• Management roles at school or faculty level increasingly regarded as a path to promotion
• Increasing awareness of impact in research and of the overall student experience
• These conditions have also led to the emergence of ‘Third Space’ roles within academic or professional contracts
Examples of ‘Third Space’ roles

- **Research management** eg knowledge exchange, incubation and spin out, preparation of bids, relationships with funding partners, database development
- **Public engagement** eg employer links, workplace learning, regional and public agency development
- **Learning support** eg tutoring, programme design/documentation, academic literacy, research into educational practice, educational technology
- **Online learning** eg online programme design/development/adaptation, social media
- **Institutional research** into eg student recruitment/outcomes, employability
The concept of *Third Space*

- Concept from cultural theory to explore spatial relationships as opposed to cumulative/historic accounts of human/organisational behaviour
- Spatial relationships seen as more significant than structures (social networks across formally recognised spaces)
- Applied to diversity and difference eg east west cultural geographies, race, gender and class
- Provides for new voices and perspectives, making the invisible visible, the implicit explicit
The emergence of Third Space

- Professional Staff
  - ‘Perimeter’ roles eg
  - Generalist functions (eg registry, department/ school management)
  - Specialist functions (eg finance, human resources)
  - ‘Niche’ functions (eg quality, research management)

- Examples of Institutional Projects in Third Space
  - Access/equity/disability
  - Study skills
  - Regional partnership

- ‘Perimeter’ roles eg
- Academic Staff

- The Student Experience
  - Life and welfare
  - Widening participation
  - Employability/careers
  - Equity and diversity
  - Outreach
  - Learning Support eg:
    - Programme design/development
    - Web-based learning
    - Academic literacy
    - Work based learning
  - Community and Business Partnership eg:
    - Regional regeneration
    - Community outreach
    - Knowledge exchange
    - Business/technology incubation

- Mixed teams
  - "The Higher Education Professional"
  - Whitchurch (2013)

- Pastoral support
- Teaching
- Teaching/curriculum development for non-traditional students
- Links with local education providers
- ‘Third leg’ eg public service, enterprise

- Research
Third Space roles supporting research

Professional staff

General administrative support roles

Specialist functions eg finance, understanding eg EU bidding process

Supporting eg industrial liaison/enterprise

'Third Space'

Third Space roles eg

Research enterprise
Incubation/spin out
Knowledge exchange
Impact/database management
Business development
Employer links
Bespoke higher degree programmes for industry
Regional partnership
Public sector/community development

Academic staff

Academic research and its dissemination

Supporting postgraduate students and early career staff

Public and community engagement

Mixed teams academics/professionals

Public engagement
Four 'lenses' 

- Roles not necessarily specified in job descriptions or career structures, but evolve... not only to support and facilitate, but also to promote and develop institutional activity, characterised by
  - Working in new **Spaces**
  - Developing new kinds of (mode 2, applied) institutional **Knowledge**
  - Developing new **Relationships** (internal, external, lateral, hierarchical, networked...)
  - Establishing **Legitimacy** for third space roles and work
• Working at interfaces/ambiguous conditions
• Therefore managing plural environments
• “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office” (learning partnerships manager)
• Turning this to advantage…
• Safe space in which to be creative/experiment

but

• May be outside mainstream structures, communication channels, checks and balances
• More self-reliance, less security
Knowledges

• Applied, evidence–based (Mode 2) knowledge eg research into student learning

• Contextual/cross-boundary knowledge: “It’s not enough just to know how to be able to be an accountant… or to manage staff… in order to be effective within a university you need to understand the context.” (faculty manager)

• Contribution to knowledge of eg research management/new forms of pedagogy as academic field (publications, conference papers…)
“if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place” (educational technologist)

- General flattening of organisational relationships; lateral, non-positional leadership
- Teams needed with range of expertise
- Staff gaining responsibility eg for teams and projects earlier in careers
- Concept of partnership with rather than service to academic colleagues
Legitimacies

• Credibility likely to be built on basis of non-positional, personal authority/agency: “There’s no authority that you come with” (planning manager)
• Ability to participate in disinterested debate with academic colleagues: “learning to divorce argument from people” (T&L manager)
• Appreciating different academic/professional work “rhythms”
• Attitude of academic colleagues that “If you solve a problem for us, we’ll come back and work with you again” (teaching and learning manager)
“you’ve got a third class of people... who are fundamentally engaged in bridging the university and the outside world and these people are the kinds of people who negotiate arrangements with government funding agencies, who negotiate with companies, who arrange a lot of the programmes that we do with small businesses and things like that... It’s professional managers..., they might come from businesses, lobbyists,... who have a particular professional skill because we need it... I think some of the academics adjust to this wonderfully because they say here’s someone to help me... and others feel threatened by it because they’re saying these people are impinging on my turf... (professor, social science, pre-1992 university)
“[Academics] weave in their research [into teaching], and through links with industry, we create [more] research projects… [Students] put time and effort into their studies; assignments relate to real issues; it flows through into the overall skills development and strategic development of [local] organisations (enterprise manager)
• Status of *Third Space* work: “I’m a director but I’m not a director… the extent of my authority and jurisdiction is unclear…” (enterprise manager)

• “you’re not regarded as a real academic, and yet I’ve probably done more as an academic than many academics have done this year… the research I’m doing… [is seen] as dirty, and not as real academic stuff” (research partnerships manager).

• ‘Permission to publish’…

• Whether to stay in *Third Space*; move out of HE; take eg faculty responsibility for T&L; aim for Chair in academic practice or vice-rectorship; pursue MBA, doctorate?
• More flexible career frameworks (eg career climbing frame – University of Southampton); new career tracks eg knowledge exchange pathway (University of Strathclyde)

• Role design: “roles need to be continually challenging to avoid boredom… to avoid job dissatisfaction or staff turnover” (Knight & Lightowler 2010)

• Shared practice: “A unique perspective is achieved when working at the interface of research supporter, community engager and scholar” (Grove et al 2018)

• Giving authority eg to negotiate with external agencies

• Mentoring, secondments, professional development...
Creating added value...

• Onus on individuals to demonstrate added value eg
• Understanding complex regulations and ‘rules of the game’; advising on appropriate funders;
• Building professional capital in the field
• Improving success rates in eg attracting funding/enabling spin out
• Assisting with regional development
• Enabling other academic staff to focus on research and teaching
Why does Third Space tend to be recognised only by those within it...? 
How can it be legitimised more widely? 
Can it be created where it doesn’t exist? 
Are we all Third Space now?
References


• Locke, W., C. Whitchurch, H. Smith and A. Mazenod (2016). *Shifting Landscapes: meeting the staff development needs of the changing academic workforce*. York: Higher Education Academy.

