

The Rise of *Third Space* Professionals

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Centre for Higher
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The Projects

- Two studies funded by the UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE)
- Nine institutions; 70 respondents; UK/US/Australia
- Sub-set of 42 respondents with doctorates, publications, and/or experience of teaching/research in tertiary sector
- Undertaking roles with significant academic elements (tutoring, programme design, institutional research)

- Complex institutional agendas has led to a diversification of roles
- Incorporation of eg practice subjects
- Movement in and out of higher education
- Full-time, linear careers no longer universal
- Preferences of individuals for more flexible life- and work-styles

Mixed backgrounds and roles



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- Backgrounds in eg adult and continuing education, policy agencies, scientific research/practice, charitable sector
- Research training also prepares for careers that may not be purely academic
- Job description for Learning Partnerships Manager (UK) required: "...academic credibility... experience of generating external income, and involvement in project management"

Preference for mixed roles



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- People who could have gone 'either way'...
- Positive choice/intentionality arising from eg:
- Ideological commitment to eg widening participation, equity and diversity
- Function no longer interesting/too specialist
- Preferred team working/project orientation
- Pragmatic eg role offered route into higher education, career development, funding opportunities; or needed job in specific location

The emergence of *Third Space*



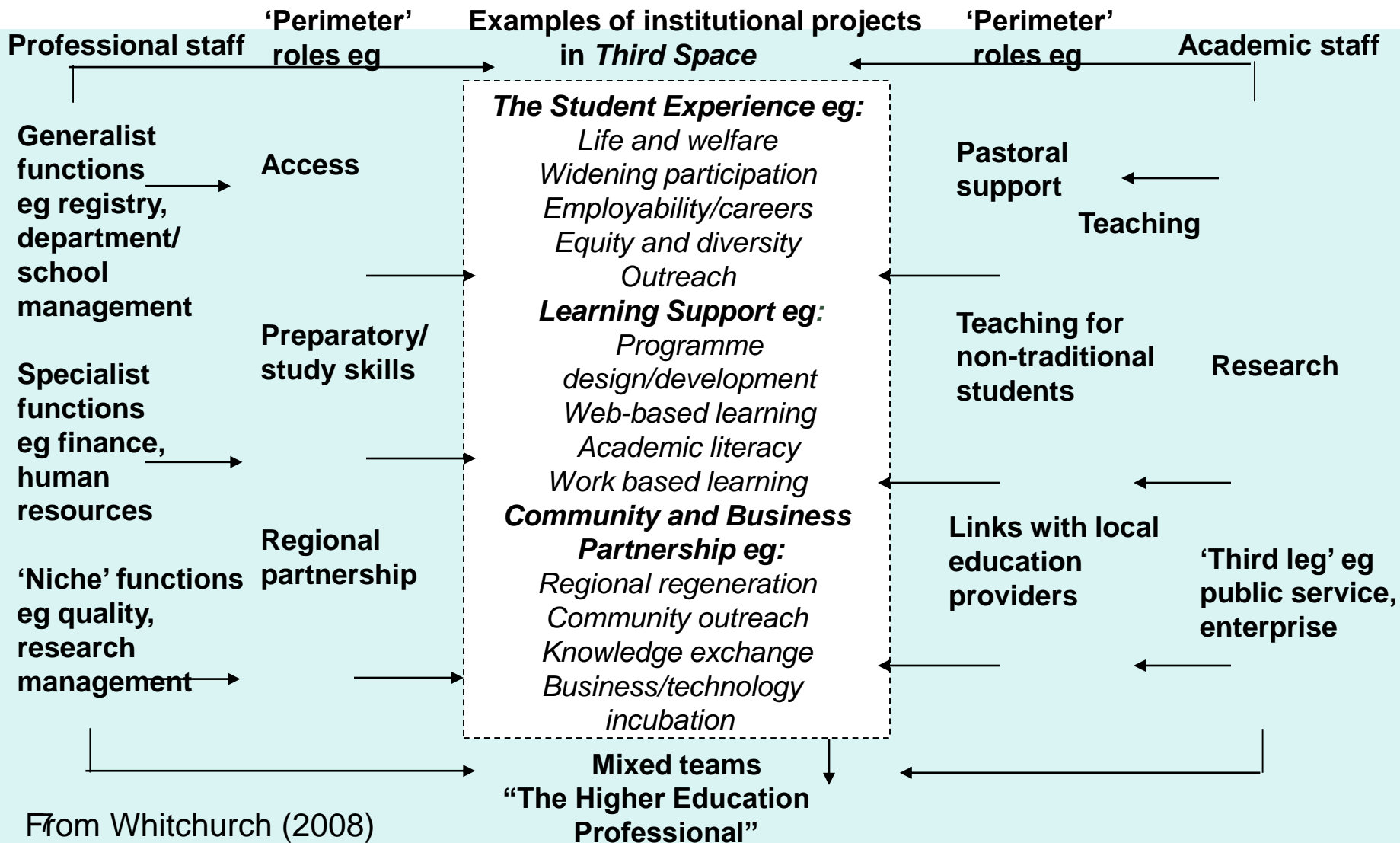
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- Formal employment categories of ‘academic’ or ‘non-academic’ don’t reflect reality
- This has created a “*Third Space*” (represents *approach* to roles as well as the content)
- “I’ve always worked at interfaces.. although I will occasionally say ‘well of course we’re just marginalised’... I like to be where it doesn’t matter if you bend the rules or do things differently” (learning partnerships manager)

The Emergence of *Third Space*



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Third Space as a concept



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- Comes from sociology/cultural theory:
 - “A dynamic, in-between space” in which “cultural translation” takes place (Bhabha 1990)
 - “a difficult and risky place on the edge, in-between, filled with contractions and ambiguities, with perils but also with new possibilities ... containing more than simple combinations of the original dualities’ (Soja and Hooper, 1993)

- Ambiguous conditions arising from working at interfaces:
 - “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office” (learning partnerships manager)
 - Turning this to advantage...
 - Not associated with specific agendas
- Sense of being ‘under the radar’
- Reflected in “invisible workforces” (Rhoades 2010) and “secret managers” (Kehm 2006)

- Safe space in which to be creative/experiment
eg work-based research; programmes of study
support of senior figure/mentor *but also*
- Lack of organisational checks and balances
- Sense of struggle/tension (the 'dark side')
 - Working with given structures for practical purposes, but also critiquing them
 - Outside mainstream communication channels
 - Political dimension?

- 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)
- Applied, evidence–based (Mode 2) institutional knowledge eg research into student outcomes

- Transforming ‘information’ into ‘knowledge - interpretation and presentation
- “My role isn’t just to present data but to try to interpret data... through policy analysis... timing, politics, the media you use, the way you communicate it, is probably even more important than the actual findings of an analysis” (institutional researcher)
- Contribution to body of knowledge in higher education as academic field

Relationships



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- “if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place” (learning technologist)
- Lateral team working across hierarchies
- May lead in one setting, be led in another
- ‘Partnership’ rather than ‘management’
- Internal and external networks
- ‘Weak ties’ – building social/professional capital (Putnam 2000; Florida 2002)

Relationships



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- “you’ve got two different groups of people often talking two different languages” (learning technologist)
- Becoming multi-lingual, interpreting between different constituencies
- Using language that is acceptable
- Also developing new language around eg partnership, teamwork, networking, institutional development

- Credibility based on non-positional authority:
 - “There’s no authority that you come with” (planning manager)
 - “It’s what you are, not what you represent” (learning partnerships manager)
 - “... I’ve had to create my own role, find my own ways into systems and force my way into meetings, rather than wait for someone to ask me to contribute” (learning technologist)

Legitimacies

- Ability to participate in disinterested debate:
 - “learning to divorce argument from people” (teaching and learning manager)
- Anticipating likely responses:
 - 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)

Example: An employability manager



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- Worked with local employers to improve graduate employment
- With academic colleagues to integrate employability into curriculum
- Overcame negative perceptions about students from non-traditional backgrounds
- Created 'safe' space for students
- Raised aspirations of students, staff, employers

Example: An employability manager



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- A positive approach to overcome resistance: “it’s no use me saying ‘we’re at the bottom of the league table...’”
- A translational approach: “we... do... development work with [academic staff] in terms of their own practice, linking with the modules, and [helping them to] understand what employers are looking for”.
- Self-help: “I offer people places they wouldn’t normally go to...”

Paradoxes and dilemmas



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- 'Safe' and 'risky' space
- Academic credentials but 'non-academic'
- Working with academic and professional 'rhythms'/timescales
- Politically aware but neutral positioning
- People-oriented but diffident about managing others
- Differential perceptions of power between academic and professional staff...

Adding value



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- It can be argued that *Third Space* roles:
- Support academic roles eg raising the quality of the student experience, sourcing funding, building social capital in the community
- Reflect more complex agendas as well as the preferences of individuals
- Release academic staff to focus on mainstream teaching and research *but*
- Onus on individuals to demonstrate this