Reconstructing Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of *Third Space* Professionals

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Aims of session

To provide an opportunity for participants to consider:

- Changes to the roles and identities of professional administrators and managers
- The creation of new ‘spaces’ at the interface between professional and academic activity (‘Third Space’)

Two studies...

• Funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE): www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications

• (1) *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures* (Whitchurch 2006, 2008)

• (2) *Optimising the Potential of “Third Space” Professionals in UK Higher Education* (ongoing)
Context

• Literature on ‘professionalisation’:
  – qualifications; code of practice
  – increasing specialisation
  – from “administration” to “management”
• Less account of:
  – increasing diversity of professional staff
  – mobility in and out of higher education
• No analysis/theorisation of these changes
Respondents

• Five UK institutions (pre- and post- 92)
• 41 interviews plus electronic questionnaire
  – Generalists eg registry, dept’l managers
  – Specialists eg finance, human resources
  – ‘Mixed’ roles: learning support; widening participation; community partnership
• Further interviews in Australia (10) and US (15)
Findings I...

• Different approaches to similar roles
• Particularly in relation to functional and/or organisational boundaries
• Not necessarily related to job descriptions or organisation charts
Two finance directors…

1 – Post-1992
“A lot of the significant contact that we have with academic managers is in terms of how they manage their financial resources … we have to have oversight of that and report to the requisite authorities.”

2 - Pre-1992
“… we try to bridge this divide between ‘let’s keep the academics happy and the RAE is all important…’ [and] developing … activities elsewhere [such as widening participation, regional partnership]… We’re growing, not just in size, but in diversity and complexity… you can’t have a finance director who is just number crunching…”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity ‘dispositions’</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>‘Bounded professionals’ (voluntary or involuntary)</td>
<td>Work within clear structural boundaries (e.g., specialist function, job description)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Cross-boundary professionals’</td>
<td>Actively use boundaries and cross-boundary knowledge for strategic advantage and institutional capacity building</td>
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<td>‘Unbounded professionals’</td>
<td>Lack of consciousness of boundaries; focus on broadly-based projects across the university, and contribute to institutional development</td>
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<td>‘Blended professionals’</td>
<td>Dedicated appointments spanning professional and academic domains</td>
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Findings II: 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
- Outreach / study skills
- Access / equity / disability
- Community / regional partnership

The Student Transitions Project
- eg Life and welfare
- Widening participation
- Employability and careers

The Partnership Project
- eg Regional / community development
- Regeneration
- Business / technology incubation

The Professional Development Project
- eg Academic practice
- Professional practice
- Project management
- Leadership / management development

Multi-functional teams “The Higher Education Professional”

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

Teaching
- Research
- ‘Perimeter’ roles eg

Generalist functions (eg registry, department/school management)

Specialist functions (eg finance, human resources)

‘Niche’ functions (eg quality, research management)
Characteristics of Third Space I

• Flattening of management and leadership:
  – done by more people
  – at earlier stage of careers
  – less ‘gap’ between managers and managed
  – may lead in one setting, be led in another

• Non-positional authority:
  – “There’s no authority that you come with”
  – “It’s what you are, not what you represent”
Characteristics of Third Space II

• Ambiguous working conditions
  – “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office”
  – Turning this to advantage
• But also ‘safe’ space in which to experiment eg
  – Support of senior figure or mentor
  – Work-based research opportunities
  – Programmes of study/masters/doctorate
Discussion

• Identify an area where you are aware of “Third Space” taking place
• What might be the implications of “Third Space” for
  – Individuals
  – Institutions?